"Before Eden and December 32nd, even before the rise of the 4 Founders, there was the Kingdom, and all power users in Japan fell under its rule…"

When an ancient terror threatens to rise in modern day Japan, the Code:Breakers must learn the truths Eden obscured. Yet the tale of their predecessors is not enough - especially when they realize that Pandora's Box may not be completely closed after all...

Rated M for language, violence, graphic imagery and potential suggestive themes.
Disclaimer: I do not own Code:Breaker.
Chapter Summary

In which the stage is set

Chapter Notes

Rated M for language, violence, graphic imagery and potential suggestive themes. Sakura/Ogami, Rui/Kouji, Yukihina/Hikee, OC/OC, among others that are as of right now...a surprise. Disclaimer: I do not own Code:Breaker.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 1: Coming Home:

In which the stage is set.

It had been six long years, but Kouji was finally ready to return home. His quest to bring back the power users expelled during the war against Eden was at an end, and more than fulfilled - those he had sought brought back friends and family of their own, and powers and practices that would fortify their future. With them in place, it would be nearly impossible for anyone to follow in Prime Minister Fujiwara's footsteps.

Kouji scanned the coastline of northern Scotland with clouded eyes, seeing more clearly into the past than the present. He had sent along the new power users ahead of him, after conferring with Heike and Yukihina who were settling some unfinished business of their own. Although they would not be personally in Japan to welcome the newcomers, they assured him Sakurako, Zed, and Shibuya would be.

He smiled grimly to himself as high winds buffeted his body. With his mission completed, there was nothing to keep him from returning to Japan, and checking in on the four remaining Code:Breakers. He was looking forward to measuring the progress Yuuki, Toki, and Rei had made, and the thought of seeing Rui again-

The world around him went utterly still, and Kouji felt the loss of wind against his body like most would notice the lack of air in their lungs. He was enveloped by a sense of immense emptiness, and when he attempted to shape air between his fingers he could not. His forearms trembled from the exertion, yet his power was locked away as cleanly as if he were undergoing one of Shibuya's tests - yet there was no rare kind here, and the sensation was too overwhelming to be human...

With a cry, Kouji shot out his arms, propelling wind along his arms in a tight spiral. The force generated was sudden and strong, and finally enough to break through the incursion. As he did so the suffocating sensation ended, as suddenly as if it had never existed. When the wind was his to
command again, Kouji took a deep breath and focused on the surrounding area, looking for any anomalies, even to the slightest inhale.

There was nothing. He was alone on the cliff, and he was not surprised. Dread settled over his body, and with it, remembrance. It had been over a century, but he had experienced this sensation before, when he had faced inexplicable terrors—demons and dragons chief among them. He had not forgotten the primal fear of facing them; fundamentally different as they were from mortal men. Yet they had been exterminated during the years following the Great War, and the few that had survived the initial purge were undone by the modernization of the world.

...all save one: the only one powerful enough to withstand even the strongest power users' attempts at subduing it. Yet Asura slept throughout eternity, bound by the sacrifice of the warriors who had been mad enough to fight it. Kouji shook his flyaway hair from his eyes. This was not the time to fear the impossible. If the dragon had woken, he would know. Everyone would know.

What, then, could rob his lungs of air, and quicken the blood in his veins?

Kouji did not know. He sure as hell was going to find out, however.

Halfway around the world, Sakurakouji Sakura frowned, deep in thought. In both hands lay an avocado, and she squeezed with the care of a surgeon. Which was more ripe? Judging by color alone was not good enough, as she had learned. She deliberated with great care, finally deciding on the one in her left hand when she was jostled into from behind.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, I didn't see you there-"

In her surprise, Sakura clenched her fingers into fists, inadvertently crushing the fruit down to the seed. Green pulp dripped from her fingers, and passersby stared in wonder. Both avocados had been bright green, and nowhere near ripe. How could such a delicate young lady possess such strength in her grip?

Annoyed, Sakura plastered on a polite smile as she faced the woman who had ended all plans of eel and avocado sushi tonight. Her eyes widened when she realized who it was. "Prince-dono?!

Hachiouji Rui smirked. "The one and only. My, but what a surprise seeing you here, Sakura!" She glanced to the side, a hand placed theatrically over her heart. "It must be fate. Oh! And it looks as if I've wrecked your shopping trip - well, I really must make it up to you. Let's go get lunch, shall we?" She leaned in close, finishing in an undertone, "Not even Rei can begrudge us that much. Especially as we met totally by accident." She winked and straightened, long strands of hair slipping over her shoulder. "Well, what do you say?"

Although the mention of Ogami made her heart clench in her chest, Sakura nodded firmly, dropping her shopping basket and flicking the avocado from her fingers. She would just have to come back later to buy Puppy's food. Ignoring the incredulous stares from the other shoppers, they made their way to the exit.
Twenty minutes and one vigorous handwashing later, the ladies found themselves deep in conversation as they awaited the arrival of their meals. There was plenty to discuss, and even more to only vaguely hint at - since Sakura's "exile" from the power user's world six years ago, they had only managed to meet up a few times, always under some flimsy excuse. Rui kept the conversation from heading anywhere confidential, choosing to discuss their mutual friends instead.

"Toki's doing well, although I'm sure that's not a surprise. He's gotten a bit lazy- between Nenene and a new girlfriend every week he's let his training go. But we'll kick him into shape when he gets back. Oh! And Nenene is doing well, also. Have you heard from her since she began studying in the United States?"

Sakura smiled fondly as she nodded. Fujiwara Nenene was one of the few people from her past she was allowed - even encouraged - to communicate with. Her powers would never return, and as such it was deemed acceptable for even the rare kind exile to keep in contact with her. The rest were supposed to be barred from her, but they had all found their own ways around that - Toki would send her playful texts and pictures, always from a different number; Rui would bump into her in grocery stores hours away from her district; Heike would mail her expensive teas and questionable literature; Yuuki would simply show up on her doorstep, announcing that he was hopelessly lost, and could he possibly stay the night…?

Only Ogami had not made contact with her in the six years they had been separated. Yet even he had kept a close watch over her - her belief in him and her frighteningly accurate sense of smell had assured her of that.

Rui stirred her tea, wondering if she could get away with pouring a generous amount of whiskey into it. Everything tasted better with whiskey. "Toki will be glad to hear that. Now let me see...Yuuki's just as rambunctious as ever, and just as irresponsible. He disappeared for a whole week a few months ago, and would only come back when Rei threatened to burn his favorite Nyanmaru doll." Rui ignored Sakura's shifty glance. So that was where he had gone. "Hmm...Heike and Yukihina are in the States at the moment, and hopefully won't destroy anything irreplaceable when they spar. Who else...ah! Aoba-chan and Uesugi-kun are currently stationed in Africa, and have apparently become quite adept at uh, taking care of each other."

Sakura took a long drink of tea to hide her smile. Rui tried so hard to be blase and unaffected, yet her face was still tinged with a blush. They had all grown up so much over their time apart, yet Rui still tended towards bashful. "That is good to hear. Uesugi-kun will keep Aoba's head firmly on her shoulders, I think." She gave a small smile to their server, who had just approached with their meal. "Thank you. How about yourself, Prince? I see you've grown your hair long…"

Rui's answering smile was small yet genuine. "I...yes, I have. I'm doing well. Busy, certainly. Those boys all need protection, after all!"

Sakura's eyes flicked between Rui's eyes to her hair. "And are you still waiting?" For Kouji, was the unvoiced continuation. Sakura knew Rui had asked him if she could, a long time ago. Yet he had not given her a proper answer, and his ambiguity had allowed her only to hope. Once, Sakura would have found such a response unfair. Now she yearned for even that little.

Rui's color deepened, and she ducked her head, attempting to hide her expression behind her hair. When her response finally came, it was in a subdued voice. "Yes."

Sakura didn't respond. She stretched her hands out across the table, confidently taking Rui's within her own. Even so, she prepared herself to be headbutted. When Rui did nothing but squeeze her
fingers gently, Sakura decided to take the pressure off of her friend with some news of her own.

"Speaking of waiting, I finally heard back from the graduate law program at the University of Tokyo - I will officially be a student next semester. My essay on the corruption inherent in political systems went over surprisingly well.." Sakura smiled brightly, hoping the change in topic would dislodge her friend from her sorrow. "Just you wait, Prince-dono! In just a few more years, I'll be a lawyer, and you better believe I'll change the world. The Code:Breakers won't be half-citizens any longer - they'll soon be full-fledged members of society!" She winked sassily at her friend, a new addition to the standard Sakurakouji repertoire. Rui couldn't help but smile fondly. Sakura had proven her mettle over the last few years, never complaining, never faltering in the face of Ogami's decision. She had also never forgotten her friends, or their shared resolve to not only save the world - but to save them.

The girls dined for over an hour, eating as slowly as possible, and talking as much as they could. It could be months or even years before they came together again, and each wanted to make the most of each other's company. There was one topic that neither touched upon, however. Rui would not bring up Rei unless Sakura asked, and that was something she had not done for the entirety of their separation. Even Toki, with all his easy charm, couldn't get her to utter one syllable on the subject of the man she had loved and lost not once, but twice.

Did she know how carefully Rei watched her? How he devoted every moment of his spare time in making sure she was safe? Rui wanted both their happiness more than anything, but the way things stood she saw no way of making it happen. While she and the others could flout the rules - Yuuki the most brazenly, of course - Rei would never go back on his word, even if they could ensure her place in society. He had left her for many reasons, and it was the painful truth that their feelings for each other were simply not strong enough to gainsay them.

It appeared that some things, no matter how beautiful, were not meant to be.

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Even more than a good fuck or a hard fight, Toki wanted a cigarette. He had given up smoking after his father died, yet right now he would have given up his left lung for one measly cancer stick. He hadn't realized addiction could be this awful. Yet neither had he counted on being partnered with Yuuki for the last three months on a dead-end mission that resembled a wild fox hunt more and more each day.

"Come on, Fourth. I'm pretty sure she went this way."

Toki scowled at his partner, but the rambunctious redhead was already charging off down the alley. He wasn't moving too quickly that Toki couldn't catch him, however, and Toki decided his griping would have to wait. The cloaked figure they were currently chasing was the closest thing they'd had to a lead for over a week, and he was not losing it over a goddamn imaginary cigarette.

He took off after Yuuki. Yet by the time he finally hit his stride his partner had suddenly stopped, and he slammed painfully into him. "Ow! Son of a- why the fuck did you stop, Yuuki?"
"Because she did."

Swearing once more, Toki sidestepped his friend, who had shot up 12 centimeters the year he turned 17. When his view was no longer obstructed by Yuuki's surprisingly burly shoulder, he could see what he'd been talking about. Standing only a few yards away from them was the figure they had been chasing - yet their hood was still firmly fastened under their chin, hiding both identity and gender. Toki was just going to have to take Yuuki's word that she was female, and to work his magic.

He stepped forward with his palms open, hoping to nudge this encounter into the realm of calm and friendly chats. "Now, now. No need for all this running around, miss. We just have a few questions; no need to get violent-" Toki cut off abruptly as the figure pushed their hood back, revealing that it was, in fact, a woman. A woman who - save for the shoulder-length hair - looked startlingly like Toki's father.

Screw calm and friendly. Toki had to bite his tongue to keep from making things dangerous. "You- who are you?" He tried to take another step towards her, but Yuuki held him back.

"Keep calm, Fourth. Just because she looks like him doesn't mean she is him."

Toki took a deep breath, trying to identify with Yuuki's childlike logic. He then fixed the mysterious woman with a pointed look. "Well? Mind dropping a name, here?"

Her face hardened into an expression he had been intimately acquainted with since childhood. "My name would mean nothing to you, and is therefore unimportant. My message is what brings me here: you need to return to Japan. Both of you. Before the sleeping beast wakes, else Japan will be destroyed."

"Is that a threat?" Yuuki shed his absentminded demeanor, eyes suddenly sharp.

The woman shook her head. "No. It is a warning. It is far beyond my power to manipulate such a thing. All I can do is prepare those who can."

Her eyes slid to Toki, who said nothing but stared at her thoughtfully. "It would help if we could trust the deliverer of such news. Seeing as how you look too damn much like my dearly deceased father, I'm not sure how inclined I am to believe you." Toki shook off Yuuki's arm, and folded his own. "Forgive us for being cynical, but the old man was kind of a dick."

Her eyes narrowed in response. "Only the fact that you killed him forgives you - I have far more reason to hate the man than you know. Besides, do you think you are the only one alive who shares his blood? Foolish boy - your father lived for more than a century. Did you think you were his only family?" She shook her head sharply. "Enough of this. I have wasted enough time. Either heed my warning, or do not - and your own death be upon your heads." She thrust her arms outwards, causing the cloak to billow in their wake. From her hands issued forth a smoke that cut across their lungs and eyes. There was a harsh glitter that burned against the backs of their eyelids, rendering them momentarily immobile.

"If you seek to fight, approach the rare kind. He will know what must be done." Her parting instruction echoed in their ears, yet when they opened their eyes she was gone. Yuuki cupped his ears, straining for the slightest hint of her direction. Yet after a moment he straightened, and shook his head.

"Nothing. Sorry, Fourth."
Toki wasn't surprised. They had been chasing this woman down for three godforsaken months, and to be left with only this cryptic message? Worse yet, a message that led them to that shitty cat? He swallowed an aggravated sigh, and thought seriously about breaking down and smoking a whole fucking pack of cigarettes. It was the only thing that might make prolonged exposure to Shibuya bearable. "Thought so. C'mon, Yuuki. Let's pack it in. We gotta' catch a flight back to Japan tonight."

"So you believe her?"

Toki shrugged as he pulled his cell phone out of a deep coat pocket. "Not a hell of a lot of choice, is there? Besides, we can get out of this dump and eat some good food again. I swear these people only eat potatoes drenched in gravy."

Yuuki nodded. "And then we get to see Nisemaru!"

Toki sighed. "And then we get to see Nisemaru..."

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He is standing at the edge of an abyss, and leaping up from the darkness are spiral of flesh and fire. Behind him are the demons, or the souls of those he has killed. The weak are those for whom there is no difference. The strong are those who were innocent.

The air around him crackles with a frenetic energy, shot through with electric threads in shades of blue and green. The ground crumbles at his feet. He knows, dimly, that if he were to fall into the darkness below and impale himself on the coils that snake around him that all would be over. It is not a frightening prospect: he faces this very possibility every moment he is awake.

There is a wooden cross on his back, heavy yet deceptively small. It causes him to tilt forward, knees buckling under the weight. Sometimes he entertains bittersweet fantasies of toppling headfirst into the abyss. It would be so easy - to exhale, and let his knees fail him. He would fall slowly and silently, until the flames below rushed upwards towards him and all his sins; all the warring facets of his personality would be erased.

It is a pretty thought indeed, to dream of his own demise. Yet such weakness is easily overcome. It lasts as long as he does not think of her, and those moments are few and far between. If only he dreamt of her as well-

Rei startles awake, eyes snapping open in the darkness. The images of his dream faded quickly from his mind, leaving him only with the memory of smoke and flame, and the feeling that underneath it all had been a sound akin to the beating of mighty wings. Yet his first thoughts upon waking were, as always, of her.

Let every day be a struggle. Then they would always be connected.

He rolled over, careful not to bang his head on the bars below his bed. He had not completely reverted to his pre-Eden mindset; since moving out of Shibuya's mansion he slept on inch high pad
below a western style bed. It was no longer for his perceived safety - it was simply harder to wake and wonder if he were still in the mansion, with her right next door, and if he tilted his head he could see the hole between their walls he never could bring himself to fix-

_Enough._

Rei picked up his mobile, allowing himself to lie prone long enough to check his messages. He didn't expect any; he had unearthed and destroyed a ring of slavers just two days ago, and had nearly entered his lost form because of it. He assumed they would allow him at least one more day to rest. That would be ideal - he could spend a little time shadowing her. Maybe he could even determine whether or not she'd heard from the law school she had applied to.

*Message from: Master of the Universe*

Rei felt a headache coming on. First of all, that was the last time he let Shibuya anywhere near his phone. Changing his contact information was infantile and stupid, as he would immediately change it back to something unflattering. Secondly, the fact that his old teacher was contacting him at all was exhausting. They met occasionally, and trained slightly more so. Still, Rei simply was not in the mood. Especially if it cut into his Sakurakouji-watching time.

*We have a rather large problem. Meeting tomorrow. Mansion, 5pm. Do not contact anyone.*

And then, exactly as soon as Rei finished reading the first message-

*And stop stalking my daughter, you pervert!*

Rei ground his teeth. Large problem? It had better not be a hole in the roof Shibuya expected him to fix. And he wasn't stalking her, he was just observing, as was perfectly normal. Stupid Shibuya. Stupid middle-aged men who masqueraded as high school student council presidents; who wore stupid cat costumes that didn't even look like a frigging cat; who could still kick his ass five times out of ten and who had fathered the only thing that could possibly make Rei cave.

Rei rolled back over and shut his eyes firmly. He was not looking forward to tomorrow. He was looking forward to tomorrow *at all.*

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*Chapter End Notes*

I realize avocado are maybe not the most Japanese ingredient I could have thought of for Sakura's sushi. Yet it is delicious so let's all eat it anyway.

Sakura and Rei not being meant for each other is the biggest lie I can currently tell. Seriously. Rui stop thinking that way.
To business: some things may not be canon, but I have done my best, working off the raws and rough translations of the last 5 chapters. (If interested, go to forums at mangafox. It will give you the general idea).

Upon reading the end of the series I was left with many questions. Who the hell is Kouji, and where was his backstory? How did Yukihina's lost form change from snow...to gender swap? Why on earth did they think exiling Sakura from all the Code:Breakers (and her rare kind father - who is the only source of rare kind serum) was a good idea? And just what was Heike's lost form? (I wanted to know the ENTIRE TIME).

So I thought about it. And this came out. This is a story about the past- even before December 32nd, and the rise of the 4 Founders. It's a story about Kouji, Shibuya, Fujiwara, Sakurako, Zed, and Code:Emperor, as well as a few characters I will make up (largely to kill off). In the end, it will also be a story about Sakura and Ogami, because I cannot help it.

It could be considered a bit O.O.C., especially in the language used in the past. It can be considered proper universe if you assume (as I have) that the main players 100+ years ago will undergo somewhat drastic changes as they age, to reflect not only their own experiences, but also the times.

I hope you enjoy it :)
Shibuya was nervous. Throughout his long life he had faced not only wayward students and the might of Eden, but creatures of strength and malice no longer seen in today's world. Not only faced - he had survived and conquered. His blood coursed with a power so unique his kind were contained and ostracized, and he had risen above such treatment again and again. He had married the most terrifying woman of the last century, and trained some of the strongest people the world had ever known. Yet it was currently 4:47 PM; the meeting would commence in minutes, and he was twisting his sweater into knots.

*What if they no longer like meeeeeeeeee?*

Life was so much easier when he could hide behind the nyanmaru mask…

Rui arrived first, as he had guessed. She brought with her several loaded bags of snacks and ingredients for supper, and flushed only slightly when she declared her intention to make dinner for everyone at meeting's end. Shibuya nodded thoughtfully, not telling her the 'meeting' was not likely to end quickly. Oh well. They all would have to eat *sometime.*

Toki and Yuuki arrived next, jet-lagged and obviously mulling something over. Why, Toki didn't even realize he wasn't wearing his costume! Yuuki was in slightly better spirits, and it only improved when he located one of his extra nyanmaru heads and promptly stuck it on his own. It was this that Toki finally noticed, when he scolded his friend and his eyes traveled over to Shibuya, who was currently wearing his smartest cap and biggest grin.

Toki's shocked expressions were always a pleasure, Shibuya decided. He was simply too goofy-looking when surprised, and he lost all resemblance to his father.

Rei arrived last, with none of the excitement or fanfare of the others. He snuck in when Yuuki and Rui were cavorting in the kitchen, with Toki laughing at the pair of them. Like Rui, he was unsurprised to see Shibuya's face, merely grimacing before returning the older man's nod. He would have moved past him without any further ado had Shibuya not muttered something that sounded suspiciously like *daughter stalker* to him when he came close.

A short yet furious scuffle ensued, and by the time Toki looked back and realized that Ogami had arrived, katanas had already been drawn. It took several headbutts and admonishments from Rui before everyone calmed down, and the meeting could begin.

When they were all seated on the couch, Rui took charge. "All right, Shibuya. You've brought us all here. What's so important?" She held up a hand, prepared to be aggravated. "And *don't* tell me
it's just because you missed us. Otherwise I'll give Rei his katana back."

Rei smirked, but Yuuki snuck a guarded glance over at Toki, who was currently staring down at the coffee table. Rui noticed none of this, however, and kept her gaze on the rare kind.

Shibuya sighed dramatically. "Ahh, Prince. Still as blunt as ever, I see. I suppose that means you haven't noticed anything...odd in the last couple of days?" She shook her head without hesitation, and Rei, who had finally noticed the cloud on Toki and Yuuki's face, spoke up.

"I haven't either, to be honest. Has something happened? Or is this just a ploy to fix your decrepit home?"

A vein in Shibuya's forehead twitched, yet was hidden by the hat. Sometimes, he wondered at the nerve of brats, nowadays. He also wondered why on earth his daughter liked this one so much. "Well, then. That explains that. Although I suppose it shouldn't be so unexpected..." His voice dropped to a murmur that only Yuuki could hear. "Powerful as you all are, I suppose it can't target what it doesn't know..." Yet before Yuuki could say anything, Shibuya brightened, bringing a fist to his palm. "No matter! We'll just have to start from the beginning. We should have plenty of time, anyway. An entire week at least!" He looked over his shoulder, pausing only to glance at Rui. "You can come in now! These ungrateful children don't listen to me, anyway." He turned back to the Code:Breakers on the couch and smirked. "So I'll let them talk instead."

Kouji walked in from the kitchen, all flyaway hair and crooked smiles, and he lifted a hand in greeting. If his eyes sought out Rui's first before smoothly sliding to Toki's, no one else noticed—they were far too focused on the smaller figure behind him, who, when they stepped from behind him, threw the living room into tumult.

"You!"

"Mystery Ladymaru!"

It was at the same moment that Rui found her own voice, temporarily lost from the shock of seeing Kouji again. "K-Kouji! You're here?"

Even Rei had something to say. "Ahh, you're back. Was your mission successful?"

Shibuya swallowed a grin at the high tension. Rui was stuck between joy and embarrassment, and her face was turning that familiar, peculiar shade of magenta. Yuuki and Toki were far more straightforward - they watched the newcomer carefully, expressions of distrust and disapproval, respectively. Only Rei seemed unaffected, but that didn't surprise Shibuya. The only thing that could surprise him was halfway across town.

But now that they all were here-

"Kouji, Maka." He stood and sketched a small bow. "Welcome to my illustrious abode. Now, now, Kouji, don't smirk at me like that. I'm merely being polite for our guest." He gestured to Maka, and she bobbed in return. "It's been many years, my friend. It's a pleasure to welcome you back to Japan."

"So you do know her." Toki's gaze moved from Shibuya to the woman who could have been his father's twin. "You could have just said that instead of being all cryptic."

Maka said nothing, merely flicked her eyes dismissively to Shibuya. "Thank you for having us. I hope we shall not overstay our welcome."
At her side, Kouji snorted. "Polite as always, even after all these years." He glanced over at Toki and grinned at his disgruntled expression. "Just wait until Karin gets here. She'll thaw out soon enough."

"Where is Karin? I assumed she'd be with you?" Shibuya made a show of looking around Kouji, into the kitchen. "Don't tell me she chose not to come? She's the only way of gauging how much time we have left."

Maka frowned and responded for Kouji. "Of course she's here. She simply…" She trailed off, grimacing.

Kouji picked up the slack. "She stopped to 'look at something interesting.' Apparently something warranted a closer look." He shrugged and made his way over to the couch, nonchalantly leaning on the arm closest to Rui. He spared a small smile at his beautiful comrade before finishing. "She'll wander in when the time is right. We should probably explain a thing or two before she gets here, anyway. Otherwise the young ones will get too antsy to listen."

He leaned back, pulling his flask from his pocket and twisting the cap off, one handed. Next to him, Rui sat still as a statue, barely breathing in her attempt to sense every particle of his being. Such was her fixation on him and attempting to remain calm that she didn't notice the way he kept glancing down at her under his lowered eyelashes.

Shibuya clapped his hands suddenly, bringing everyone's attention back towards him. Rui and Kouji were suspiciously close to flirting, and Toki still looked as if he'd rather vault the coffee table and throttle Maka. It was time to explain, whether or not the final player had arrived. "Well then! Shall we begin? I suppose it can't hurt to explain a little before she gets here...the story is long enough as it is. Now then, where to start…"

Toki leaned forward onto his forearms, framing his handsome face between his hands. "Why don't you start with the 'sleeping beast'? You know, the one that apparently is gonna' wreak havoc on Japan?"

Shibuya's head tilted to the left. "Ahh, so you already know? As expected from Toki-kun, master strategist!" He winked broadly and it was this that tipped Ogami over the edge.

"Look, is this actually a serious matter? If not, I would like to leave. Charming as this reunion is, I don't want to waste my time here."

Yuuki pouted childishly, his cheeks blowing out like balloons. It was slightly disconcerting expression for his masculine face. "Awww, c'mon Sixth! Stay and play for a bit. You're so boring, these days."

To his right, Toki groaned. "Again with the number nicknames? I thought we were past that!"

Yuuki shrugged. "It's nostalgic." Then, he turned to wink at Rui. "And it's cute."

Ogami's head fell into his hands as the his three companions began to bicker. He was just about to stand and leave when a new voice broke through the rabble - feminine, speaking politely with an odd accent that he couldn't quite place…

"Oh, look. Everyone is here already! And they all look so surprised. See, Sakura-san? I told you this was a good idea!"

Ogami's head shot up and without sparing a glance for the speaker, his eyes locked onto the woman he had held himself away from for the last six years. For a just a moment all his dedication
drained away and all he could see was her, standing barely five feet away from him. It was impossible to mask his expression, and even more so to care about the guarded looks Toki and Rui were throwing at him. All that was important was that Sakurakouji-san was looking back at him. Finally.

"Nyanmaru!" Yuuki launched himself off the couch, throwing himself into Sakura's arms. She stumbled but caught herself, letting go of the newcomer's hand in the process. Yuuki nuzzled his head against her neck, exactly as he would in his lost form. Softly he began to sing Nyanmaru's theme song, and even from the couch Rei could hear the whispered refrain - friend of all kitties...

He scowled. So much for letting Sakurakouji-san live a normal life, protected from the pain and loneliness of being a power user. The same for team solidarity - since when had Yuuki decided it was acceptable to flirt with Sakur... girls?

Thankfully, Rei wasn't the only one with Sakura's welfare in mind. Yuuki found himself abruptly torn away from his friend, a glowering Shibuya the culprit. "Watch where you're touching my daughter, catboy." He flicked him in the direction of the couch, and Yuuki spun until he tripped over the coffee table, landing face first onto the couch. Shibuya didn't notice. Instead, he blew his daughter a kiss, which Sakura caught with a comically serious expression on her face.

Rei frowned. He supposed by now it was clear that Shibuya was Sakurakouji-san's father, but to announce it so openly? More so, they had progressed to the point of blowing kisses? There was something peculiar going on here...

Shibuya moved to the taller woman at her side, slinging an arm carelessly around her shoulders. "Now that all the players are assembled, let me introduce Shihoin Karin, who will not only be taking on part of your training, but will also help explain what, exactly, you are all training for."

Rei finally tore his eyes away from Sakura to glance over at the woman who had arrived with her. She was tall as a man, but that wasn't too unexpected - she wasn't completely Japanese. With her tangled copper curls and slanted black eyes, she was a disconcerting mix, even for half-castes.

She bowed with an ease not often seen in foreigners. When she rose, she smiled widely at Kouji, and he snorted in return. "Hello, everyone. I am sorry to keep you waiting. I could not resist when I met a young lady with Sakurako's face, and Take- I mean, Shibuya's blood." She nodded to Sakura, who returned the favor with the same solemnity she had treated her father. "Now. What do they know? Do they know of the dragon? Could any of them feel it?"

Toki scoffed. "Excuse me? Dragon? Now I know you're all shitting us. The dragons were exterminated in the Great War, before Eden was established." He leaned back against the couch, casually crossing one leg over the other as he did so. "Dragons no longer exist."

Karin stared at him thoughtfully, and a strange progression of emotions flashed across her face. Chief among them was not hatred, as was the case with Maka, but something far more complicated. "You...you are Fujiwara's son, are you not?"

Toki scoffed. "Excuse me? Dragon? Now I know you're all shitting us. The dragons were exterminated in the Great War, before Eden was established." He twisted his chin at Maka, who had stepped closely behind Karin. "But yeah, that's me. Fujiwara Toki, son of the great bastard himself. But that has nothing to do with dead dragons."

Karin stared at him thoughtfully, and a strange progression of emotions flashed across her face. Chief among them was not hatred, as was the case with Maka, but something far more complicated. "You...you are Fujiwara's son, are you not?"

The ease in Toki's demeanor slipped away, leaving the cold rage he had clung to when they had faced the man in question. "Believe me, sweetheart, I don't like it anymore than she does." He tilted his chin at Maka, who had stepped closely behind Karin. "But yeah, that's me. Fujiwara Toki, son of the great bastard himself. But that has nothing to do with dead dragons."

Kouji spoke from his perch on the couch. "So you know a little about the war, huh? Then tell me the name of the King of Dragons, the one 1000 men died to subdue."
Toki shot him a questioning glance out of the corner of his eye. "I don't know that much. Just that they were all killed. Heike used to read us bedtime stories about it."

"Heike? Not Heike Masaomi?" That brought Karin's eyes away from Toki, where they had been resting with a guarded, thoughtful expression. She turned to Shibuya, her expression serious. "Is he here?"

Shibuya shook his head. "No. He and Yukihina are in the States, and won't come back unless absolutely needed. They have issues of their own over there."

"I see. Well then." She glanced around the room, eyes lingering uncomfortably long on Ogami's face. She looked between him and Sakura, and then shook her head. "With all respect, Heike was wrong. There was one dragon too powerful to kill, we had to settle for binding it in slumber. Yet lately it has become restless, and I fear soon will wake." She tapped the skin beneath her left eye. "I can already feel it going."

Rei finally found his voice, although he kept one eye on Sakura who stood next to her father, steadfastly refusing to look in his direction. "Feel what going? How can you tell it will wake? Who even are you?"

She snapped to attention in a mockery of a soldier's salute. "Ahh! Forgive me, introductions are indeed in order. Shihoin Karin, youngest child of Shihoin Tokitou, and first-cousin to the fine young man drinking whiskey on the couch. Previously appointed liason to the king's Imperial Army, and, according to Eden's archives, officially deceased. Special ability: well, you'll know soon enough. And as for how I know that Asura will soon rise…" She dropped all pretense of humor, her voice growing harsh like iron on stone, "...it is because I am the one who, in the end, sealed it. I am connected to it, even now. Soon, it will wake...and things will not be pleasant."

A moment of silence descended upon the group. It was Rui who finally broke it, although what she chose to address was auxillary at best. She pointed at Kouji, yet addressed Karin: "You guys are cousins?" Karin nodded cautiously.

"Huh."

Toki glared at her. "Well now that that priceless piece of intelligence is out of the way, let's go back to the goddamn dragon." He shifted his glare onto Karin, who had begun to smile at Rui. "How big and bad are we talking, here? Worse than Kagerou? Pandora's Box? Ogami?"

"Hey."

"I'm just saying. You can be pretty terrifying. Especially in the morning."

Kouji headed off that squabble. "By itself, the dragon should not pose such a threat. Back then, there were only a few power users capable of engaging it - and we were nowhere near your level of mastery. The problem is why it has risen. And what else will come with it."

"Oh god. More dragons? It's official: worst day ever."

Yuuki elbowed him in the side. "Shut up, Fourth."

Kouji continued as if the men sitting on the couch below him did not exist. "How much time do we have? Can you tell?"

His cousin shrugged one shoulder, before glancing at Shibuya. "Maybe three weeks? Four? Asura first began to stir about a year ago, around the time of your pandora's box debacle. Yet then it
quieted. This time is different. Something has set the dragon off, and unless we figure out what it is, worse may come."

"And unless we explain to the new generation what happened then, I doubt we'll find that answer before the dragon wakes." Shibuya turned to the Code:Breakers, before looking down fondly at his daughter. "Telling the story isn't enough, however. We'd much rather show you. That's where Maka comes in."

"Show us?" Sakura spoke for the first time since entering the room, and Rei's eyes swung to her automatically. He had to bite his tongue in order to look away. "What do you mean?"

Karin looked over at the tiny woman at her side. "Maka...didn't you introduce yourself?" She tsked at her companion's reluctant refusal. "Don't be rude. Show them what you can do!"

"They'll understand soon enough. Just tell them what they're about to see. It's going to take long enough as it is."

"Fair enough." Shibuya cut them off. "Is everyone comfortable?" He lead his daughter over to the love seat, where he pulled her down after him. After a pointed glance, Karin grinned and leaned against the wall, preparing herself for the tale. Only Maka remained upright and she positioned herself in the middle of the room, closing her eyes and concentrating fiercely.

Karin begun the tale. "While Maka prepares herself, I'll tell you what little you should know: before Eden and December 32nd, even before the rise of the 4 Founders, there was the Kingdom, and all power users in Japan fell under its rule. There were great noble families," she nodded to Kouji and he grimaced, "and those whose power elevated them to greater heights. Yet all were under the jurisdiction of the wise King of All Earth, and his earthbound goddess, the Queen of Heaven…"

Rui was the only one who noticed the transition from Shibuya's living room to 19th century Japan, and it was only because Kouji had let his hand fall against her shoulder, fingers tangling in her hair. She looked up at him, hoping there would be something in his countenance that would put an end to the confusion in her heart - yet before she could meet his eyes she was swathed in a darkness even she did not know, and a sense that she was no longer herself. Then there was only the dream.

Chapter End Notes

Please enjoy the double update, as a Christmas present for all to enjoy! And before you go thinking this is going to be like my older fics and I'll never update it again, I've got 45K in reserve. RESERVE. I will get this done, and it will be awesome. So read freely, and I'll update on Sundays, and I love you all.
Chapter Summary

In which the story begins, and the kingdom is reached.

Chapter Notes

The flashbacks in this story take part in the Meiji era, and was a time of rapid westernization and change. I’m no historian, however, so please forgive any mistakes pertaining to historical accuracy! (Also please tell me what I’m doing wrong, then I can fix it!)

... Just so no one gets it into their heads incorrectly, Hideyoshi is NOT the Prime Minister. Evil McEvilpants will show up soon enough, no worries.

... It might be a bit odd to start off with Karin, but just as she is new to the power user’s world, so are we...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1898

Karin stepped off the boat, knees wobbling at the transition from sea to land. Even in this modern day and age, combined with the assistance of her special abilities and that of her cousin, it had taken months to reach Japan. Those months had taught her nothing but a hatred of the ocean and a slightly better grasp on intricacies within Japanese language and culture. Although her father had insisted she be fluent in his native tongue, he had not raised her as was expected within his culture - this, coupled with the fact that she had undeniably taken after her caucasian mother – made her nervous.

Yet anything was better than sitting on that damn boat for one more day, and so her relief outweighed her fear upon taking her first steps on Japanese soil. Shihoin Kouji, her paternal first cousin, traveling companion and comrade, turned back and laughed at her. “Welcome to Japan, little cousin! I’m surprised you’re this eager to be here – I know how little you were looking forward to the food.”

Karin scowled and manipulated a twist of wind so that a strand of his long, dark hair escaped its braid and fluttered behind him. This only made him laugh harder, drawing the attention of the dockhands unloading the boat’s cargo. Then, using similar movements, he called upon the air to do the same to her.

“Kouji!” Karin hurriedly smoothed down the copper-red locks. All right, so she knew she started it, but Kouji also knew how self-conscious she was about how different she looked. It hadn’t been as noticeable among her mother’s people, but she had been assured that in Japan very few people
would like anything like her – even the half-bloods tended to darker coloring. Perhaps it was wishful thinking, but she hoped to find a home here in Japan. After all, there was nowhere left to return to…

Shaking off the remembrance of the reason she was here in the first place, she walked down the ramp, trailing closely after her cousin. Although he had left six years ago, men still bowed to him as he passed. Karin supposed it was natural. He had aged well, and did not look too much older than the day he left. Yet it was more likely they knew of his return from either his father, Toshirou, or the king himself.

Thinking of the king reminded her of her mission, and she clutched her bag tightly to her chest. Would he listen to her fairly? Or would he take offense at her father’s betrayal, and not accept his last gifts?

“Lord Shihoin! This way!” A pompous looking official called out, and Kouji raised a hand in greeting.

When the man had turned away, Kouji muttered out of the side of his mouth, “Your introduction to Japan starts here, cousin. Don’t be nervous, but that man was in the employ of Fujiwara Hideyoshi - the field marshal of the king’s army. Although his special power is fairly weak, his military genius is second to none. I assume he will travel with us on the way to the palace.”

Karin’s eyes widened. It was intimidating to be thrust among the nobility of Japan’s power users immediately upon arrival. She had hoped for more time to steel herself before meeting the King. Still, she had not been raised to fear, and even less to show it. She breathed deeply and adopted what she hoped was a calm, unafraid visage.

Five men awaited them at the dock, and at first glance Karin could not tell which one of them might be Fujiwara. Two were short, wearing traditional Japanese garb; two others were slightly taller and dressed themselves in outdated, but undoubtedly Western array. None of them looked particularly noble, but as she was basing her opinion off of her experiences with Kouji, she really had no idea. If she had to guess, she would say it was the fifth - the only one taller than her, as well as fashionably dressed. He was a handsome man who stood with impeccable posture and stared her down with an expression that could set fire to wood. She did not break his gaze, however, refusing to be cowed before she spent an hour in this land.

The eldest - one of the shorter men - spoke first, to Kouji. “Welcome home, young Lord Shihoin. I must say, it is a surprise to see you’ve brought a...friend back with you. But perhaps we should be insulted - are our women not good enough for you?”

Karin stiffened. She turned her gaze to the speaker, and so missed the way the tallest man’s eyes flickered. Yet before she could retort one of the western-style men picked up the conversation.

“How can you say that, Daichi? Just look at her! She’s as tall as a man, and built like one too! She’ll be more popular among the women, at any rate-”

“Enough.” Karin’s vehemence cut through the insults, and she concentrated on the wind between their bodies. Raising her palms slowly, she propelled the three who had slighted her seamlessly into the air, keeping them still even when they began to flail in panic.
"Oi, what is this?"

"Lord Shihoin? Make her release us!"

"Let us down this instant!"

"No."

Karin resisted the impulse to spin them violently, but just. "Is this all Japanese men think of? Whores and variety? I had been told this was a place of honor. It seems I was told wrong." She dropped them suddenly, all three falling to their backsides. They glared at her, and one reached for his bow.

Beside her, Kouji threw back his head and laughed as they rose to their feet. "Not even an hour in and you’re already upending men on their asses!" He bowed low, turning a tense moment into a joke. "Gentlemen, may I present to you my dear cousin, and daughter of the wayward Shihoin Tokitou, Karin." She bowed, but looked only at the two men who had behaved themselves. As she rose, she locked eyes again with the leader, the one with the impenetrable gaze. *He doesn’t like me, she thought. He may be smarter than his men, but I’d bet anything that he doesn’t like me at all.*

That in mind, she was only a little surprised when he bowed and finally introduced himself. "I am Fujiwara Hideyoshi. My men and I will be accompanying you on your way to the capital. I apologize for their audacity...you and your cousin will not be further troubled by them, I assure you."

Kouji grinned and shook Fujiwara’s hand. "That’s good to hear, Field Marshal. Thank you for your assistance."

"It is a matter of course, Lord Shihoin. Yet the distance to Takama ga hara is far, and we will only be able to travel by train for the first half. We should move on, if you are ready."

With one final bow in their direction, Fujiwara left them, disgruntled attendants in tow. Karin waited until they were out of earshot before turning to her cousin. "Was that because I am a woman...or a foreigner?"

Kouji shrugged. "Probably a mix of both. After all, Fujiwara wears a suit in public, yet from what I recall maintains a very traditional personal life."

Her eyes shuttered. "Women are just as powerless here as they are in the western world, aren’t they?" It was not a question; the dejection in her tone made clear of that.

Kouji placed a hand square on her scalp, looking her dead in the eyes. It was an action taken from her father, who had done so on the rare occasions he had something serious to say. "You can’t think of yourself as a woman, here. You must be a power user first and foremost, and serve the king. Else your time here will be very difficult, comrade."

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It took nearly three weeks to reach Takama ga hara, the seat of the man who ruled over all the
power users. It was located on an island hidden from the world by arts both ancient and new, and had flourished for hundreds of years. During its long history, the city had never been discovered by outsiders, although they occasionally engaged in trade with a select and trustworthy few. It was here that the power users flocked, and even their ungifted family members were allowed to live there - albeit usually in the villages that orbited the capitol.

They traveled by train to the eastern coast of Japan, disembarking a few days away from the coast. Then they made their way east, relying on the tried and true paths to make their way to the nearest village, where they would receive transport to the island.

To Karin, everything was new and exciting. The people looked so different than her mother’s - slight and dark compared to tall and fair. Yet the land was even more different. At this time of year, her homeland would be swathed in darkness, and the sun would only shine for a few hours a day. Here the climate was much more moderate, and even though it past noon the sun still hung high in the sky.

Between the new experiences, training with Kouji, and a few more...charged interactions with Fujiwara’s retainers, it was easy for Karin to forget why she had come in the first place. Yet when the fishing boat finally came to rest on the shores of the island of the power users, remembrance came - as well as the fear of meeting with the king to give unwanted news.

As the boat docked Fujiwara turned to her, extending a hand to help her onto land. Although he had made it quite clear what he thought of women who used their powers aggressively, he had proven himself to be a gentleman. If it were not for the challenge in his glance and the suspicion that she would be seeing much of him in the future, Karin could have forgiven him his sexism. As it was, she kept careful around him, and was thankful for his small acts of civility. She grasped his hand firmly, as a man would. Neither spoke, even after she was firmly planted on the ground.

In retrospect, she wished he wasn’t so nice to look at. Then she could dislike him properly.

From there, it took three more days of travel to reach the palace. Along the way, she spoke only to Kouji. Although the content of their message was too painful to dwell upon, she had no idea how to present herself to the court, nor how the king would take the news. It took the entirety of this last leg of their trip to drill her in the basics of court etiquette, the spoken and unspoken hierarchies of the palace, and to run over contingencies in case things went badly.

Furthermore, Fujiwara had finally told them that the king had remarried several years ago, and to none other than Shihoin Hikari - Karin’s older half-sister. This complicated matters. If Hikari blamed Karin for the loss of her father, then the king may be more inclined to punish her for her father’s transgressions. On the other hand, it brought Karin into the path of the person she had long wanted to meet, and brought her closer to fulfilling an old promise she had made with her father. She could only hope that the queen was as kind as Kouji claimed.

...
entrance the entire day, watching the bustle of activity. Yet she could not put off her duty, so she followed Kouji through the covered archways until they arrived at the palace.

They were commanded to the king’s chambers immediately upon arrival. The honor was due in large part to Kouji, whom after six years abroad had finally come home. Out of their entourage only Fujiwara accompanied them, as one of the highest ranking men in the realm. The others had to remain behind, and Karin exchanged heated glares with his entourage as they left. She hoped that this would be the end of their interactions - as all the men were connected to his household, rather than the army, she did not think it was too fantastic a wish.

The council chamber was huge and open, with pillars that stretched from floor to ceiling, and a glazed window that reflected a different shade of light every quarter hour. At the far end of the room sat king and queen, perched on elevated thrones. While the queen wore an elegant kimono and hid her painted face behind a fan, the king lounged casually in a western suit at the cutting edge of modern fashion. He exuded an immense aura of power that she could feel from across the room.

She swallowed. She was unsure of who to fear more: the king...or her unmet sister.

"Presenting Lord Shihoin Kouji-"

The king gestured him forward, and the queen sat up a little straighter in her chair. Karin glanced at her cousin from the corner of her eye, and wondered at the serious expression on his face. Compared to his expression when lit with the joy of battle, this didn’t suit him. It also made her wonder whether they had more to fear than he had admitted.

She waited patiently yet nervously as they warmly welcomed him home, asking him question after question about his observations, training, and experiences. Just as his counterpart, the Emperor Meiji, the King of All Earth was highly interested in modernization, and it had been the angle Kouji had used when he decided to leave the palace and to make contact with his uncle, six years ago.

After half an hour the queen, who had shot frequent glances at Karin since Kouji began his tale, finally garnered her husband’s attention. At a lull in the barrage of information, she gestured to the back of the room where Karin stood, next to Fujiwara. The king’s brow clouded. “Kouji...it seems you have brought someone back with you. I assume she is a power user, if you have brought her here. I had not assumed, however, that you were in a marrying mood.”

Karin frowned, and at her side Fujiwara stiffened. She wondered why everyone in Japan assumed she was the love interest. Especially for Kouji, who had - to her fairly extensive knowledge - never looked favorably upon anyone in his life. She knew it was difficult to see what little family resemblance there was, but was there truly no other reason for a woman to come to Japan? Or perhaps they all assumed western women were harlots? She shook off such thoughts at Kouji’s snort of laughter.

“Forgive me, my lord, but I must correct you - the young lady in my entourage is already family not only to me, but to the queen. If you will permit me, may I present to you Shihoin Tokitou’s daughter, Karin?”

The queen dropped her fan. It folded as it landed, and Karin felt a chill run down her spine. For a moment, no one moved, taking in the ramifications of Tokitou’s actions - fathering a child out of wedlock in the foreign country he had exiled himself to. Even worse, not telling the king.

“Do not be afraid.” Fujiwara’s whisper was barely more than a baby’s breath, yet it cut through
Karin’s fear like a knife through warm butter. That he thought of her and knew precisely what to say meant more to her than his grudging respect at the docks, and his civility throughout their journey. Four words were enough to make her forgive him everything, and to raise him in high esteem. Yet most importantly, it gave her the courage to walk forward, meeting Kouji at the center of the room.

The king stared down at her, and she was close enough now to make out his features. He was older, yet handsome; with even features, a noble bearing, and slanted eyes that drew one in. “Do you speak our tongue?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Are you who he claims?”

“Yes, my lord.”

He looked down at her, long and appraising. “I did not send for you. Why have you come?”

She took a deep breath before bending to one knee and bowing her head. “I have come to give you bad news, my lord. Shihoin Tokitou is dead. He and the messengers you sent all fell when my village was attacked by skraelings from the forest. Kouji and I were able to fight them off, but barely.” She reached around her, pulling several cloth-wrapped bundles from her pack. “My father finished several commissions before he died. Yet I do not know who they were for, and so I bring them to you.” When she raised her head she met not the king’s eyes, but the queen’s. “I am sorry.”

The queen stared back at her with glacial impassivity, and Karin felt very small and stupid with her wet eyes and bag of trinkets. They weren’t even a fitting reminder of her father; a man who had laughed like a donkey, wandered alone for hours without telling anyone, and used a wide array of sound effects when telling the least of stories. She blinked hard to fight back the moisture. It was not up to her to beg for her father’s forgiveness. He had abandoned his old family, and now she must accept the consequences.

“Skraelings?” The query came from the king, who, if he noticed the silent exchange between the half-sisters, did not remark on it.

“What her people call demons, my lord. Monsters of shadow and bone. They targeted the power users in the village – my uncle’s workshop seemed the focal point for the attacks. Had we not just returned from sparring in the forest, we wouldn’t have known they were there until it was too late.”

“Did they attack those ungifted?”

“No, my lord.”

The king nodded in Karin’s direction. “And her ability? “Wind manipulation. It is very similar to mine.”

“I see.” Not a word of remorse, either in a personal or official capacity. It shouldn’t have surprised her - power users who choose exile must face harsh consequences. The king sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers together. They were shaken loose a moment later when he pointed to one of the bundles in front of Karin. “I’ll need an in-depth report on this later, with the war council. For now, show me what the craftsman has made.”

Shihoin Tokitou’s power was unique, even among a rare people. His was the ability to restrict or to outright negate someone else’s power. Yet he could not use it directly onto someone. Instead, he infused his ability into objects - a glove, a ring, a necklace, or a child’s toy, to name but a few
examples. Truthfully, his ability was much more useful this way. The objects he created lasted long after his death - something they had tested with the ear cuff she wore, hidden by her long braid.

Karin unrolled the largest bundle, slowly revealing a cloak, an unsheathed dagger, a stuffed bunny, a cup, and two belts. She laid them in a row, briefly explaining what little they had been able to test of the products. One of the belts was much stronger than the others, and curiously, the knife would not cut, no matter what it was used against. The next satchel contained three rings, a necklace, and a folded bracelet. They had experimented more with this selection, and had something to say for every item. The smallest bundle she did not touch, merely setting it aside.

The king nodded, satisfied. “Yes, several of these I recognize. The doll should be for Fujiwara’s youngest, if I am not mistaken.” His glance fell on the final package, and he frowned. “And what of that?”

Karin inwardly cursed. She had thoughtlessly taken it out with the others, and although its recipient was in sight, she did not know how to give it to her. “It is a gift, sir. For Hik- for his daughter. If she will accept it.”

All eyes turned to the queen, who watched the bundle with thoughtful eyes. After a long moment of deliberation she leaned down and picked up her fan, flicking it open and using it to hide the lower half of her face. When she spoke, her voice was surprisingly low, and even at a quiet tone seemed to cut right through Karin. “Bring it to me.”

"You can do this, this is the accomplishment of your mission, and for God's sake don’t drop it now…!" Karin rose, with the bundle in both hands. Without looking anywhere but her half-sister’s face, she slowly walked up the steps of the dais, only stopping when she stood an arm’s reach away from her. From this close, she could smell her perfume and see the faint smudge of paint by her left ear, yet she still couldn’t read the purpose glittering in the queen’s black eyes.

“Unwrap it for her.” The king’s command was jarring, but made sense. It was foolish to expect the queen to take an unidentified object. Karin unwound the cloth, letting it drop to the floor. When she was done, she held a small teakwood box, ornately carved, and whose wood caught the light in peculiar ways. It was magnificent. It was also without a latch to open it.

The queen took the box, turning it over and examining it from every angle. Finally she looked up into her younger sister’s eyes. “He made it for me?”

“I assume so.”

“You assume?” There was a challenge in the queen’s dark eyes, but for the first time that day Karin felt a bit of hope. She had not refused the gift, after all, and she would do so if she hated it, surely?

“I did not see him make it. He had it as long as I can remember. But it is for you. He called it ‘his labor of love’ and told me that—” Karin swallowed, fighting back the sorrow the memories caused, “…he said it must be delivered to his first masterpiece from the hands of his second. That is all I know.”

The queen watched her with a peculiar look in her eyes. “The remembrance pains you?”

“I loved him very much, my lady.”

After a long moment where her eyes searched out Karin’s, she nodded. “I see. You are quite honest, and straightforward as well.” Her lips turned up in a small smile, and all the ice was gone from her gaze as if it never existed. Her next words were directed towards her husband. “I approve
of her, my lord. If I may request, can she stay with me for a time? I would like to have the opportunity to acquaint myself with this unexpected gift...and the giver.” She looked back at Karin, and the smile had grown large and impish underneath the paint. “After all, it is not everyday that one gains a sister.”

Karin’s light eyes widened. While this was wonderful news, the sudden change from reserved to welcoming was worrying. Had the mysterious box caused her or them to go mad? Or had she simply passed some unknown test?

Behind her, Kouji chuckled. “Now there is the cousin I remember. I almost didn’t recognize you with your queenly mask in place.”

The queen’s smile grew. “My lord, may I invite both to stay as long as they wish? Only if my cousin behaves, however. Otherwise we should throw him out.”

The king smiled fondly at her, kissing her fingers in a very western gesture. “Of course, my dear. They’ll have to stay for briefing at the very least. Although if you’d like a moment with your sister now, I suppose I can release you.”

“Thank you, darling. We’ll be in the garden if you need us.”

Stunned, Karin turned to Kouji in hopes that he would explain any or all of this. The bewildered expression on her face only made him snicker.

The King of All Heaven also noticed her amazement, and gestured grandly to his wife. “My wife’s judgement surprises you? It is not only for her kindness that she is named the Queen of Heaven - it is also due to her infallible ability to read the hearts of man. Just to look her in the eye is enough for her to know your character. It is why a stranger such as yourself can be trusted in her company.”

Karin turned to her sister who rose and stepped gracefully down to her. She leaned to the side and without thinking, Karin offered her arm. The queen accepted, smiling mischievously up at her. It was then that Karin wondered just what she had gotten herself into.

Queen Hikari led her down the marble path, nodding graciously to the few still remaining in the chamber. Her sister, whose senses were still reeling only noticed one - Fujiwara, who stood near the door and bowed deeply as they passed. Karin hesitated a moment, waiting just long enough for him to rise.

Thank you, she mouthed, smiling as she did so. A curious expression colored his eyes, fleeting and indecipherable. There was no time for a more discerning glance, however. The queen tugged her slowly yet steadily from the room, and soon only the men remained. Fujiwara waited until the door had closed behind them before approaching the throne. Meeting him at the center were the chief of staff, and the commander of the special forces - the only other two men in the war council who had waited on the king today. Shihoin’s testimony would have to be presented before the entirety of the council, yet the queen’s exit had allowed them an opportunity to have a preliminary discussion on the disturbing news from the north.

Kouji’s smile dimmed as soon as the women left the room. He shook the hands of all the men, lingering slightly longer with Fujiwara. He wondered at his silent interaction with his cousin, yet knew it was not the time to ask.

The king opened with no effort wasted on preliminaries. “Now that the women have left us, let’s discuss the attack. Kouji, you’re sure demons attacked the village?”
“Yes. They were slightly different, but undoubtedly the same type of monster that razed the coastal village eight years ago.”

“Yet how could they have migrated that far? There have been no word of attacks from other outposts…” The portly chief of staff huffed, red-faced and indignant. “And there has been no lessening on their onslaught here.”

“And the same rules apply there, as well. Only attacking power users, and are attracted to where we are more heavily concentrated…” The commander of the battalion of power users mused. “Perhaps how they travel is not as important as how they sense us.”

Kouji turned to the king. “They are still attacking Japan, then? In all my years there, they only attacked once, a few months ago. Although I did not tell my cousin, it was largely what prompted our immediate return to Japan. I also worry about what the presence of demons in the far north means.”

The king rubbed his temples and leaned forward on the throne. For a moment his entire being seemed to flare with anger, like the pulse of a bonfire. “After their first attack eight years ago the demons were quiet, waiting several more years before they moved against us again. Yet their affront has grown exponentially, and for the last several years the villages outside the circumference of the royal city have one by one become unsafe. Roads lay untravelled, and the coastal areas are nearly impossible to reach. We’ve lost contact with several villages, and have no hope of regaining it.”

“Worse yet are the dragons. Although only a few have been seen, the destruction they cause is terrible. Towns have been destroyed in a single night.” Fujiwara spoke slowly, as if impressing the importance of his words on every man present. “We have lost some of our most powerful champions in battle against them. None have prevailed.”

Kouji grinned, his teeth flashing white and dangerous as a shark’s. “I suppose it’s a good thing we’ve come home, then. Training was getting a little boring.”

The chief of staff demurred. “And what can wind do against a dragon? Their scales must be at least a foot deep!”

Kouji smirked at the man. “Everything must breathe, Matayoshi. There are techniques I’ve worked out to use when I am at a disadvantage. Or did you think I’d been sitting on my thumbs for the past six years?”

The king’s attention was caught by something else, however. “We?”

Kouji shrugged. “I didn’t bringKarinhere to sit and look pretty, my lord. At a time like this I figured we’d need all the power users we can get. She is strong and resourceful, and has trained along with me. But if you can’t take my word, ask the field marshal - he’s seen her spar.”

Eyebrows raised and heads all turned in the direction of Fujiwara Hideyoshi, knowing his opinion on women and the battlefield. Put on the spot, Fujiwara gave Kouji a displeased look. “She is... powerful, my lord. If somewhat green. If she were not a woman she would make a welcome addition to any army. As it is, it is your majesty’s decision.”

“Do you think she is capable enough to serve at the front?”

Fujiwara exhaled and looked down. “It is at your majesty’s discretion.”

The king leaned back. “Well, well. That was a flimsy attempt at protest if I ever saw one. It’s
settled then- I will send her to the front lines in a month or two; let Hikari have some time with her, first. Perhaps I should assign her to your task force, Hideyoshi.” He smiled widely at Fujiwara’s hesitant nod. “In the meantime, I need Kouji debriefed and ready to begin training within three days. The demons have laid low for the last two months. They will strike any day now, I can feel it.”

The men all bowed, knowing the strength and versatility of their sovereign’s power. His command over hell’s flame was not just limited to peerless skill in battle - he knew things that no living man could know. It was a mystery that none dared to contemplate too deeply, as the king - although righteous - took even the smallest threat to his power seriously.

“We must focus on ways to neutralize the dragons, in particular. I fear that their time is coming; no longer to nip at our heels but to move against us in full force. Something is coming, gentlemen. Something great and terrible, and I cannot see an end to it.”

Chapter End Notes

With this chapter, all the original characters with important roles will be introduced. There'll be others like Kouji and Sakurako's mothers, and a smattering of rare kinds – Rei and Bentou's mothers, but this should largely be it. Maka will show up in the past, but not for a while yet as she is a toddler.

... If anyone has ever played Lost Odyssey, Queen Hikari sounds like Ming. Who was my favorite, even with the horrific outfit. Buhhh.

... Takama ga hara translates to Plain of High Heaven, and is taken from Japanese mythology. It has a wiki, in case you would like to know more :D

... The next chapter introduces my favorite character. Are you ready for this? I AM.

... Questions? Please tell me if anything doesn't make sense!!
Strange New World, Part II

Chapter Summary

In which danger and friendship are realized

Chapter Notes

I do not own Code:Breaker. Also Prime Minister Fujiwara has not shown up in the story yet. This Fujiwara is his older brother. That's why he's kind of awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1898.

Karin stood at attention, ignoring the dip of the tent that brushed against her head in an effort to look tall, strong, and utterly unassailable. If nothing else, she would settle for anything other than how she felt, which was different and awkward and alone. She kept her eyes fixed on the field marshal, who, had he not been seated, would also have had trouble standing upright. She did not gauge the heights or the levels of comfort of the other men in the tent, as she would then have to acknowledge that not a single man in that tent wanted anything to do with her. So her resolve was firm: as soon as the attendant carrying the plans arrived, Fujiwara would be outlining her first official mission with the king’s forces, and she must complete it perfectly, else she would never prove her worth. If she could at least establish that, perhaps it wouldn’t be so lonely here, since Kouji was still at the palace training recruits.

While they waited for the attendant, each person in varying levels of patience, Karin let her mind reach back to the time she had spent with her half-sister. Hikari had proven to be very different than she had appeared at first impression – such a thing was done intentionally, and had worked well in ferreting out threats to her husband and her country. Yet as soon as they were alone in the garden, the queen had shown her true self.

The queen launched herself into Karin’s arms, acting more like a girl of 16 than a woman of 26. She smiled widely into her younger sister’s stunned face. “You’re so tall! You must have got the height from your mother...I always wanted to be just a little bit more- oh, and your eyes are so exotic! Shaped like ours, but the color...ah, but you have the hair. The bane of the Shihoins, with the way it fuzzes and curls like that...” Hikari ran her fingers over the loose strands that had escaped Karin’s braid. “Yes, just like Kouji’s, before he learned how to straighten it.” Her exuberance halted long enough for her to drag them over to a bench, half-hidden by the trailing branches of a weeping cherry tree. She carefully placed the box down behind her before she took both of Karin’s hands within her own. “Now. Tell me everything. Of our father, and yourself, and your home. Did Kouji behave himself? Is your ability really just like his? How old are you?”

The queen’s barely contained excitement finally wore through her shock, and Karin smiled. “My lady, I can only answer one question at a time...”
The queen pouted, painted lips crinkling. “I think when we are together, you must call me by name. We are family! It is only right.”

“If you insist...Hikari. Well. To begin with, I am almost 19 years old...”

The women spent the rest of the day in the garden, speaking until their throats grew sore. For as much as Karin told the queen, she learned something in return. Her sister was kind as well as beautiful, and her empathetic abilities gave her understanding beyond her years. Yet there was a deep well of loneliness that yearned to be filled; shaped by her upbringing imposed by a cruel mother, and fueled by her lofty position.

Yet Hikari did not blame Karin for their father’s defection. She knew more than anyone how hateful her mother could be, and how painful it was to live with her. Fortunately she had found a reprieve with Kouji and his family – with them, she had learned that familial bonds could surpass society’s restrictions, and that in loving them she found not only freedom, but a way to strengthen her powers.

Throughout the next month, the girls had spent time and traded tales, learning of each other through stories and experience. Hikari learned of Karin’s childhood, from her mother’s soup to her father’s wayward habits, to the way Kouji still pulled her hair sometimes. In return, Karin learned all the ways Hikari had made the chief of staff red with rage, several embarrassing secrets to use on Kouji in retaliation, and the untold story of how the king and her sister first met.

Hikari had told the story late one night as the girls sat together in Karin’s room, having sent the servants to bed for an early rest. Karin sat behind her, comb in one hand, Hikari’s shining mane in the other. They had learned early on it was futile to brush Karin’s fiery curls, although Hikari was fascinated with playing with her sister’s wet locks directly after the baths. “It was at Kouji’s home, actually. His mother had just sent me into the kitchen to check on the servants, who were taking an oddly long amount of time with the refreshments. Yet when I got there I could see why – someone had broken through the window, leaving a mess of rain and glass all over the floor! It was Matsuhiro, of course. The audacious man had gotten drunk and actually walked right through the window! Several of the girls had been standing quite close at the time, and were covered in little cuts and blood - nothing serious, but it made me angry all the same. So I yelled at him. I absolutely did. I called him a ruffian and a miscreant and that if he had seriously hurt any of our girls, I would take him to the king.

“Of course, then he took off his hat, and there in front of me was Takama Matsuhiro, the King of All Earth himself.”

“What did he say?” Karin giggled and paused combing to glance around at her sister. The queen was imposing with her stark makeup, but much more beautiful without it - now one could see her faint freckles, and the tiny laugh lines that framed her eyes.

“He said, ‘Oh Lord, tell me you’re not the lady of the house!’” Hikari laughed. “Back in those days, Kouji’s mother was feared for miles around - no one could dress down a man like she could. By the time I was able to convince him that I was merely her niece, he had already gone down on a knee and begged me to spare his life. Of course he was only joking, but it went a long way in clearing my impression of him. That, and helping the girls disinfect their cuts.”

Karin had no such stories of her own. Her illegitimacy had carried a heavy stigma among her mother’s people as well, and she was nowhere near so attractive as her sister. She had known early on she was no maiden of romantic tales, and had dedicated herself to her training instead. Neither could she relate any of Kouji’s romantic misadventures as there were none.
Hikari had been astounded. “Kouji was celibate? Didn’t your women desire him?”

Karin laughed. “I suppose. But this is Kouji- I doubt he’s ever looked at a woman with that in mind. I doubt he’ll ever love anyone save his wife, whomever she may be.”

Yet her sister did not seem fully convinced. “And he never spoke of anyone? Not even-”

There was a commotion at the back of the war tent, and it drew Karin’s attention from the past to the present. The attendant was making his way through the men, clutching the rolls of papers. He kept his head down. Yet when he brushed past her, he tilted his head in her direction. All she could see was the curve of a smile, the rest of his face was in shadow.

Fujiwara held out his hand. “Finally. The documents?”

The attendant handed them over, bowing slightly as he did.

“I trust you had no trouble, Takehiro?”

“None.” From her angle, Karin could see his smirk widen. There was something...off about the man. Something different. But what? And why did it make the hair on the nape of her neck stand on end?

“Good. Stand behind me.” Fujiwara stood, and Takehiro slid behind him, ducking down so that before she could get a good glance, his face was hidden once more in shadow. Fujiwara began to speak, but for a long moment Karin could not process any of it. Replacing her determination to fully comprehend Fujiwara’s instructions was an inexplicable desire to know what was wrong about the attendant behind him. It was not in the man’s smile, infuriating as it was. It was something deeper than that, something primal-

“We are in charge of protecting the entirety of Takama ga hara, as well as the north and western lands to the sea. While many of the lands under our protection have already been lost, we will not concede one more inch of our home to the demons nor the dragons. Your mission is to reclaim the village of Nishihara. We will use it as an outpost to regain further lands-”

She couldn’t feel him. Her ability allowed her to feel everyone, even when they attempted to hide their position through modern or magical arts. No one could sneak up on her without her knowing, all that had shape and form would trigger her senses in more ways than one. Yet she could not feel this man, nor could she feel the air around him. Even with those shielded by her father’s works, she had at least been able to sense their exhales. This man was, if she relied solely on her power, either a ghost...or far, far more powerful than she.

“...the elite corps of power users will focus on the eldritch beings, priority given to a dragon, should one appear. All others focus on rescue and recovery, and bringing down those who are possessed…”

By now he had noticed her staring. The determination to know was like a fever, and Fujiwara’s instructions blended together. How could he not sense the danger in this man? How could he be on first names terms with him? Takehiro stared back, guarded amusement in his eyes. Karin’s eyes narrowed in return.

“Camp moves out at 10 AM. Rest until then. Dismissed. Shihoin, a moment.” Karin bowed with the men, still caught in her quandary. There were other power users in the tent, and none of them seemed to notice anything wrong about the aide...perhaps she was imagining things. Or the man had a subtle ability that cancelled out her own? She glanced up as she rose, but all the men in the
tent were now gone; including the mysterious one.

There was no warning save a low, mocking voice, quiet and close to her ear. “Looking for me? You’ll have to be faster than that!”

She spun and threw up her arms, barely fast enough to block his blow. Takehiro grinned and jumped back, moving nearly too fast for her eyes to follow. It was fortunate that he had been unarmed, else she would have been seriously hurt. This display both proved and disproved her theories, however. The man was no ghost. Yet even after she had made physical contact with him she still could not sense him!

“You’re a lovely woman, sweetheart, if not to my tastes. Far too bold for me - were you trying to make me blush with all that staring?”

Insufferable little…! Karin grimaced in distaste as she dodged his attacks. She wasn’t making a good show of it, as so much of her training relied on feeling her opponent and their attacks - whether their movement through the air, or through...other means. Yet with him, she was only able to judge his attacks the moment before they landed when they scrambled her airspace…

One of his blows hit hard, and although she managed to twist to the side he still caught her squarely in the ribs. She skidded back to the edge of the tent, not sparing a glance for Fujiwara, who had stood. “That’s enough, Takehiro-”

“Try it again.” She knew now what she had to do. Her command over this technique wasn't perfect, but Kouji had drilled it into her since she was 14. If she couldn’t do it now...well, how long would she last against an opponent not made of flesh and blood? Her quiet command overrode the field marshals, and Takehiro shrugged.

“Sorry, boss. Can’t say no to a lady.” He leaped forward, moving so quickly he seemed to sear the air. Karin held her ground, keeping her head tucked to her chest, focusing every inch of her concentration not on him, but on the air pressing up against her own body.

He attacked from the back, honing in on her left side. She felt his movement like a ripple in a pond, the faintest brush of air against her tricep. There was not enough time to dodge, but there was to attack - she brought her elbow back in an upward jab, catching him square in the face at the same moment he brought down the side of his palm on her shoulder blade. The contact rocked them both, yet she was able to catch herself on the edge of Fujiwara’s desk and was further steadied when he reached out and secured her. Takehiro was not so lucky, falling back and tearing through the tent and into the light rainfall.

Karin glanced back at her opponent, who sat up slowly and rubbed his nose. Bright red blood dripped from it, and she bit her lip. On one hand, it felt good to knock that man down. On the other hand, she had just hurt the field marshal’s aide.

“Enough. Both of you. I will not have you injure each other before the battle even begins!” Fujiwara leaned over his desk, annoyed and rubbing his eyes. His other hand worked at his bun, and Karin wondered how long it would take for strands to fall down over his face. It was the first time she had seen him in anything other than perfect command, and it made her gut clench. There was no more time to think about it, however, as Takehiro was suddenly at her side, once again moving far too quickly to be normal.

He was still smirking, although the drying blood on his lip made it more bearable. In fact, it made her smirk a little herself.
The sight seemed to annoy Fujiwara further. “I had planned on sending you two to scout the area ahead of time, although heaven knows how that would go now. Would either of you care to tell me what that was about? Takehiro, I did not give you permission to test whomever you would. Likewise, I would rather you had listened to my instructions, Shihoi.”

Chastised, she looked down. She did not notice the expression of the man at her side. “I am sorry. I was distracted. I should not have been.”

Fujiwara watched her carefully, dark eyes glittering in the lamplight. “Distracted by what, exactly?”

Karin glanced up his attendant, who, although no longer smiling, was just as enigmatic as he had been during the debriefing. “How do you mask your presence so completely? I can’t feel you at all. It’s...it’s unnerving.”

Takehiro raised an eyebrow. “So you weren’t gazing longingly at my handsome face? Pity. I should have known it would be something mundane as that.”

“Mundane! Even those who wear restrictions breathe, and I couldn’t sense a single exhale from you! If Kouji hadn’t taught me how to guard my own airspace, I wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“Is that how you sensed him?” Fujiwara mused, glancing from one to the other. “Very few can spar with Takehiro at all, even when he’s moving at half that speed. So your attack was not simply luck?”

Karin shook her head. “Even trained non-power users can sense a blow before it lands. I simply widened my area. I’m not as good as Kouji, but in this case it was enough. Clearly I need to practice more.” She turned to Takehiro. “I’m sorry for my rudeness. I am also sorry I found you suspicious. Clearly you are the field marshal’s man. But is that your power? Speed?”

For the first time, the attendant looked mildly uncomfortable. “Is that protocol where you’re from? To baldly ask something so personal?”

She frowned. “I- I don’t know. The only power users I’ve only ever known were Father and Kouji. Is that not something I should ask, here?”

Fujiwara cut in before Takehiro could respond. “Whether it’s proper or not, it’s something you may discuss on your own time. For now, I need your word that there will be no repeat of this outside the sparring ring. Can I trust the two of you to work together?”

Takehiro grinned. “Ahh, the brilliance of the glorious field marshal! Stick the misfits together, else the rest of the army rises up and throttles them. Well, I have no problem with it. If she can make me bleed, she’ll undoubtedly do worse to our enemies.” He smiled broadly at her, waggling his eyebrows. “What do you say, sweetheart?”

“Don’t call me sweetheart.”

“Well then what should I call you? A foreign Shihoi doesn’t seem likely...and it’s far too personal to call a lady by her first name. How about Red? Curls? Tiger?”

“Only if I can call you halfwit.”

Fujiwara watched them now with look of detached amusement. “Although I can’t argue with that, better call him Shibuya. He’s loathe enough to give out his family name.” He turned to the protesting man. “And you will refer to her with respect, no matter her legal status. Understood?”
It was not a question, and it was directed to both of them. They glanced at each other, neither relishing the days to come. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Meet back here in 5 hours - you two are moving out at dawn.”

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Her first mission under Fujiwara’s command was, until the very end, incredibly boring. She and Shibuya had set out with the sun, both determined to prove their superiority over the other. They had moved quickly and quietly through the forest, he leading and she scanning their surroundings for danger. Neither spoke. It was the only way they could keep from squabbling.

A few hours later they reached the village, and it was clearly abandoned. It was eerily quiet in a time when the village should have been waking from its slumber. Yet there were no men making their way into the forest to harvest firewood or hunt game; no women throwing open their doors to clean or cook or gossip with neighbors; no children grumbling on their way to school. There was only the creak of the wooden fence in the wind, and the oppressive sense that something was watching them.

With a quick nod and a gesture, it was established they would split up. Fujiwara would have forbidden such a decision, but both had the utmost faith in their abilities. Besides, what the field marshal did not know would not hurt him.

Karin started a counter-clockwise circuit, peering into homes to check what her senses already knew - there was no one living in the village, but corpses aplenty. Demons had dined here, ripping open men, women and children in their bloodlust. She shivered as she looked to the skies, fighting down momentary nausea. The wanton spilling of blood was by no means reserved only for demons, yet it had become the symbol of evil throughout the kingdom. Hikari had told her that women on their moonflow were ostracized, even more so if they did not burn the stained cloth. There were even superstitious beliefs circulating that claimed one could summon a demon with an offering of blood - and never mind that the demons only targeted those with power, ignoring all else. Fear was running rampant through the kingdom, and Karin believed it was the true enemy. After all, demons and dragons could be killed. Fear was what killed you.

They met back at the center less than an hour later. Shibuya broke the silence, looking uncharacteristically grim. “You weren’t attacked either? Figures. Could you sense any sign of their presence?”

Karin frowned at the nearest home. “No. Just the corpses.”

“We’ll have to run back and tell him. There’s no point in bringing the whole army for this. He’ll send a squad to burn the bodies, and purify the homes. C’mon, let’s go-”

Yet while he spoke she felt something shift. There had been movement, but it had not been in the air. “Wait. Something’s...something’s wrong.”

They turned as one, and lying in the mud was a child’s corpse lying where none had been before.
Karin’s blood turned to ice in her veins. Unlike the other cadavers, this one was full of blood - the skin bloated and dark with the rich liquid within. This child had not been feasted upon. By the warning singing through her blood, she knew this was no human child at all.

At her side, Shibuya swore. A pale hand clawed at the dirt, and the child-thing pushed itself up slowly. The monster raised itself haltingly, jerking from one position to the next, like a puppet on a string. Mud and blood caked its body. One eyeball hung loosely from its socket, yet the other turned on them with a terrible gleam. Before they could do anything other than assume a defensive position, the child-thing tilted its head back and rent the air with an inhuman scream.

From its mouth billowed a dark cloud, teeming with horrendous faces within the shadow. Demons billowed forth, inky black punctuated by the ivory of bone and teeth. Karin froze, reliving the horror of her father’s demise all over again. He had been overcome by the demons, swallowed whole by the possessed messenger. She had been too late to save him, but not too late to witness his final moments-

*Crack.* Shibuya slapped her sharply across the face, pulling her violently back to the present. He yelled something at her, yet the scream was ringing inside her skull. He gestured to the child, still spewing forth demons. Finally she understood. The child. It was the source. They had to eliminate it.

The shadows were coalescing into frightening shapes. Karin pulled the air towards her, and then released it suddenly, as a child would a spring. The half-formed demons flew back to the trees, buying her and Shibuya a little time. Shibuya was bouncing from foot to foot, glancing between her and the child with an uncertain look on his face. It took her too long to understand his indecision. “What can you fight? Demons, or the child?”

He looked like a very different man without the perpetual smile. It didn’t suit him. “The child.”

She shoved him forward, cutting a path toward the abomination with wide, swinging gestures. “Then go! I’ll hold them off!”

He sprinted forward, and the demons moved in behind him, cutting him off from view. Karin was hard pressed then - shoving the wisp monsters back, attempting to buy Shibuya time before they hardened into substantial form. Those that had already become corporeal were trickier opponents. They converged around her, and she was forced to draw the kris knife from her belt; jabbing and sweeping with the blade in her dominant hand, twisting and directing the wind with the other. All the while she engaged the defensive maneuver she had learned most reliably, the misdirection of the air closest to her body. It would not stop the oncoming blade, or claw, or bullet as would Kouji’s, but more often than not it would give her enough time to dodge, or turn aside all but the most concentrated strikes.

Yet accuracy was not as important as were their increasing numbers. Karin grimaced when a talon rent a long, jagged line down her back. She would not be able to hold them off much longer. “Shibuya! What are you waiting for?”

As if in response, the unholy wail of the demon-child ceased, and a ripple passed through the demon horde. Their source had been eliminated. Shibuya had finally fought his way to the possessed child and decapitated him, ending the flow of dark matter. Now it was a matter of dispatching the remaining demons. This, Karin could do - she ended her wind assault in favor of the bowie knife in the opposite sheath, and she fell to slaying her enemies. Eventually she carved a path to where Shibuya fought alone, katana in hand; using his inhuman speed and strength to flash from enemy to enemy and cleave them limb from limb.
Yet his defense was his weak point, as was hers. So without verbal direction they fought together, back to back. The sun rose higher in the sky as they battled, yet they never despaired of victory. They fought well together, a solid if untrained mix of talent and physical prowess. Eventually Shibuya slew the final demon, and it uttered a sharp cry as the darkness folded in on itself.

For a long moment they held their position, catching their breaths and continually shifting. Shibuya’s eyes flitted from one direction to the next, trying to guess where the next wave - if there would be one - would come from. Likewise, Karin closed her eyes and concentrated on the wind whipping through the trees, circulating through the houses, and around their very bodies. As her concentration grew deeper, she concentrated on something even more primal, listening to the beat of her heart, waiting to see if it would react as it had the first time.

There was nothing. As one they relaxed, sheathing their weapons and shaking their limbs loose. Karin hunched over, catching her breath and willing her fear down. This was the second time she had faced demons and it was no easier. If Shibuya had not been there to support her, she very likely would have been lost. Annoying as he was, there was only one thing to do. “Thank you.”

He glanced over at her and wiped sweat from his brow. “For what?”

She stood and met his gaze. He was slightly smaller than Kouji, and so they stood at the same height. The seriousness in his gaze told her he was not being facetious - he saw nothing to require thanks, even slapping her out of her shock was simply duty. The realization made her smile, and extend her hand. “For being incredibly annoying.”

He snorted, yet returned the shake. “Anytime, Red.”

2018

Sakura blinked into consciousness, rising up into awareness as she would from a dream. For a moment, the assertion that her hair was wrong, as was the shape of her body was incredibly strong. Yet when her father shifted next to her, the illusion shattered. She was back in the present, sitting in the living room, having finished with what she suspected was the first part of a much longer tale.

“Mother of God what the fuck was that?” Toki slammed both feet on the floor. “That was- it almost…” He glared at Karin, who held up a sagging Maka. “That wasn’t my father, was it?”

Sakura frowned. It had been over a year now, and Toki was still so sensitive to his father’s sins. Enough so that is masked his common sense - the field marshal had looked much like him, but was not identical. If she had to guess, she would say-

“Field Marshal Fujiwara was your uncle.” Kouji nodded to the unconscious woman across the room. “And Maka’s father.”

“Is she all right?” Sakura stood and approached the women, ignoring Toki’s subsequent squawking. Yuuki was at her side in moments, bending his head to Maka’s heart.
“I can hear a heartbeat, Nyanmaru. Mystery Ladymaru is a-ok.” He flashed her a peace sign, and Sakura smiled.

“Yuuki is correct. Maka will be fine, she just needs to rest often. Her power is difficult to use at the best of times, and she has been...very tired, as of late.” Karin grinned at them, before hefting Maka into her arms. She walked her over to the loveseat and planted her squarely on Shibuya’s lap.

“Here, you take her, Takehiro.”

“What exactly is her power?” Sakura looked from Karin to her father, ignoring her friends on the couch entirely. Ogami especially. Although she had not looked at him once since the dream had ended, she could feel his eyes on her...and it was slowly driving her crazy. “She was what showed us the story, yeah?”

“She’s the dream maker.” As if he had read her mind of the resolve she had made not to look at him, Ogami spoke up from the couch. “I heard my brother speak of her, once. She takes memories and allows others to relive them.” She cast her eyes low and half-turned, so that she would only look at his knees. Any higher and she would be lost. “He thought she was a myth.”

Shibuya laughed. “She’s simply a very private person, Ogami-kun-”

“She’s the myth? You’re one to talk.” Sakura’s muttered aside startled not only her father, but also herself. Although she could not look at him she knew Ogami had heard, and from the way he shifted forward, was interested in hearing more. Mortified at what she had let slip, Sakura felt color rise into her cheeks and turned to her father, hiding her face behind the fall of her hair. “I will help Prince-dono prepare dinner, father. I leave you in charge!” She snapped off a playful salute, her embarrassment lessening when her father returned the gesture. Then she was scurrying through the door to the kitchen, nearly barreling into Rui, who was taking steeling breaths and pep-talking herself as she leaned over the kitchen sink.

“Keep it together girl. You got this. You cannot get all faint of heart now that you’ve seen him with his hair in a sexy manbraid-”

“Um, Prince-dono?”

“Wahhh!” Rui spun, brandishing a suspiciously large chopping knife. She relaxed when she saw who it was. “Sa-Sakura! Did you...did you hear that?”

Sakura would simply not be Sakura if she would lie. “Yes.”

Rui sank back against the sink and groaned. “Ughhh. Just...don’t say anything, yeah?” Although she took more deep breaths, her face slowly turned crimson. “I’m so pathetic, aren’t I? Running away the minute the dream ended…”

Sakura stepped forward, opening the fridge and removing the ingredients for nikujaga. “I’m just as bad, Prince-dono. Why do you think I came in to help?”

Rui’s eyes moved to the door, suspecting that Ogami would be in earshot on the other side of it. He did have the tendency to hold close the few things he loved. “I’m just as bad, Prince-dono. Why do you think I came in to help?”

“I’m not afraid.” Sakura slammed down the ingredients a little too hard, causing them to clatter on the countertop. “I’m not! I’m just following his stupid rules, is all. He was the one who wanted us to live in different worlds. He’s the only one who hasn’t flouted that during our years apart.” She exhaled harshly, keeping her shoulders firm. “I know why he wants that. Most of the time, it’s
doable. I’m just not used to seeing him, is all.”

Rui’s heart twisted, and her own problems were momentarily forgotten. “Sakura...you know he’s not given up on you, don’t you? He watches over you, even when he shouldn’t. It’s—”

Sakura’s sad smile cut Rui off. “I know. I know he does.” She tapped her nose. “Never underestimate a rare kind’s sense of smell, Prince-dono.”

There was nothing Rui could say to that. The girls prepared dinner in silence, each lost in their own troubles. Eventually, strains of conversation filtered in through the door. Yuuki’s voice in particular: “Why aren’t the Samurai Lady and Dead Zed here? Are they gonna’ be in the story too?”

Shibuya’s answering chuckle, “Sakurako and Zed will show up soon enough. They have something they need to check on, first. And of course they’re in the story! Just not yet.”

Rui stole a glance at her companion. “I suppose it’s obvious enough to ask, but...you and the President are on good terms, yeah? When did you start calling him father?”

Sakura smiled, and it was untinged with the stress of ignoring Ogami. “Oh, for a couple of years now. I talked to Gotoukou, and we decided I would call them both father.”

“And...you see him enough for this to come up?”

Sakura paused in her high speed chopping and looked at her companion quizzically. “Of course! We see each other once a week.” She smiled at Rui’s concerned expression. “And before you ask it’s not really a secret. Father proposed a long-term case study for the social behaviors of rare kinds. His theory is that the more interaction we have, the less we tend to ‘go small.’ Privately, he thinks we do that when we spend too much time with power users. But he’s certainly not going to tell anyone that, even if things are refreshingly less corrupt than they used to be.”

Rui shook her head. Annoying as the President was - and it seemed as if that trait hadn’t changed a bit in the last 100 years or so - he had his moments. Securing his place in his daughter’s heart and life even when her best friends were unable to was certainly one of them... Without further ado, the girls set to preparing dinner, each lost in their own thoughts. Although sounds drifted in through the closed door, neither noticed the voices of the ones who lingered in their hearts. Yet for the moment they had each other, and that was enough.

The dinner that followed was one of the most awkward of Toki’s life, and that was saying something. He had been duty-bound to eat with his father until only a few months before his inevitable betrayal, after all. But this...this came close.

For one thing, Kouji had elected to sit next to Rui, and that meant an evening of Code:Mom blushing and sputtering over her plate. Had that been all, it would have been enough. Yet tonight was the night Kouji decided to make things more complicated by giving her little sidewise glances out of the corner of his eye, directing 90% of his conversation to her, and draping his arm oh so casually over the back of her chair. Unless he was mistaken, Kouji may have even allowed his fingertips to brush up against Rui’s back. Judging by the way Rui was very red, and very, very still, she was close to her breaking point. The only way that situation could be worse was if he had been sitting in Yuuki’s seat at her other side.

Of course, that wasn’t all. The shitty cat - who had been an asshole for over one hundred years, and...
Toki privately thought that was pretty impressive - was talking with Karin, who was beginning to look more and more familiar to Toki. Yet not as she was now. It was the image of her then, with with the natural color of her eyes, and the length of her hair, and the challenge in her stance. He had seen her before, he knew it. But where?

Toki shook his head. He could think about that later. Right now, he had to focus all his considerable charm into making his situation a little more bearable. He was currently situated in the least desirable seat of all - in between Sakura and Ogami, who were directly across from each other.

Both were very carefully not looking at each other, not speaking to each other; barely raising their heads to avoid any accidental contact. The air between them was thick with tension, and Toki, with his considerable worldly experience knew exactly what it was. Unlike the rest of them Ogami had held himself strictly out of Sakura’s sights, and since his declaration of love and fervent last kiss, hadn’t so much as looked at another woman. Toki didn’t know for sure, but he would assume Sakura had been just as obstinate. Lord help him from abstinent fools, but the two were choking on an uncomfortable mix of love, lust, and unfinished business. Until they addressed that, they could count on more awkward dinners.

Thankfully, there was plenty of conversation down at the other end of the table. Karin had finally shaken off Shibuya and sat beaming at Rui, who sat across from her. Rui, who had been undergoing a very uncomfortable evening between Kouji’s fingers and her own timidity, didn’t quite know what to do about this. “Can I...is there...what do you want?”

Impossibly, Karin’s smile grew even wider. “You’re Kouji’s comrade, right? Hachiouji Rui? It’s wonderful to finally meet you. I’ve wanted to for so long-” she cut off when Kouji interrupted his quiet conversation with Shibuya to glare at her. “What? She only took care of you for over 10 years! I’m simply paying my respects.” She turned back to Rui, wagging her eyebrows. “So. Would you like to hear some embarrassing Kouji stories?”

“Karin-”

Dinner wound down as it had during the war against Eden, with laughter and shouting, impromptu battles and smashed crockery. A small place inside of Toki’s heart unclenched. Maybe it didn’t matter how odd things currently were, or how strained things had gotten after the war. Maybe he was just as strange as his friends, and the generation before them. Even with the looming threat of demons, dragons, and long-kept secrets, it simply felt good to have everyone together again.

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Chapter End Notes

Next chapter teaser: In the past, Kouji has uncomfortable discussions with just about
every female he knows; while in the present Sakura and Ogami (finally) have a
discussion of their own.

R&R!
Straining Ties

Chapter Summary

In which Kouji makes some unsettling discoveries, and Ogami does not succumb.

Chapter Notes

Chapter notes: Omiai - a marriage meeting between the prospective partners.
sensei - teacher

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1898. 2 months later

Kouji frowned as he surveyed his students, and bit back a sigh of despair. 5 months of his training and they still had problems grasping basic constructs. Many of them were completely unable to simultaneously focus on defense and offense in equal measure. Had they learned nothing? Were his instructions falling on deaf ears? No wonder the war against the unholy beings was going so badly. It was because power users like these were the hope of Japan!

“Shihoin-sensei...perhaps we should rest for the day? Shinji is already in his lost form, and Akihiko is close as well.” One of the less enterprising students spoke up, but he was right. Shinji, a burly man from the east was currently a rabbit, hopping contentedly about Kouji’s feet. His brother looked decidedly green. Kouji sighed. There was no point in rushing the students to their lost forms, especially as in rare occasions such a loss could lead to their demise. He would have to end their lesson now, and hope that they would somehow improve by tomorrow…

He released them, wondering as he often did how matters at the warfront were going. The king received messages daily, not only from the field marshal, but also the leader of the special forces. Progress was present, albeit slow-moving. The special forces division had taken out three demon infested villages, yet had lost core members in doing so. The army had a bit more luck - they had salvaged a town and a village, and thanks to Fujiwara’s personal power user team, had lost very few men. This was good news although somewhat predictable. Neither team had run into a dragon, and that was to be the true test of strength.

Fujiwara had, as he requested, sent him a few lines in terms of Karin’s progress. Apparently she was working closely with Fujiwara’s personal aide, a man who - while not a power user - had impressed the field marshal with his exceptional strength, speed and skill. Lauded as the man was, however, Kouji could find no one in the capital who had heard of this Shibuya Takehiro. It was curious and somewhat unsettling, although there was nothing to be done. Kouji could not assess the situation until he could ask Karin, or witness the arrangement himself. There was no way for him to communicate with his cousin. While she could speak Japanese fluently, her father had never taught her to read or write.
Kouji took his time with his morning routine, wishing there was someone else in the palace near his level. The king was inhumanly strong, yet he no longer had much time to practice - Kouji was lucky if they sparred once a week. There was the king’s son, who was rumored to be comparable to his father...yet the man was rarely here, and for unfortunate reason - he was illegitimate. With his father’s marriage barely two years before, the situation had become an awkward one, especially since Hikari had not yet conceived. So the young man kept his distance, and Kouji’s training suffered for it.

Kouji ran through the rest of his routine, letting his thoughts drift away. Although he was a highly intelligent man, he found his greatest solace in movement. The strength of his limbs, the quickness of his reflexes, the burn of his muscles, even the pain of battle was joyous to him. The harder he was pressed; the deeper he was wounded, the greater his euphoria grew. Karin’s people called it bloodlust, a battle-joy that was prevalent among their warriors of old. All Kouji knew was that battle defined his being. It was his purpose. He was wasted on training, especially with those who could not withstand his intense regimen. He should be out there, unleashing death upon those who stood against him, his family, his country.

Yet to lose himself in his selfish desires was against his discipline. He was not only here to train the hopeless; he was also to guard the king and queen against those who had lost their homes, friends, and families, and had seen nothing in return. While Hikari was beloved of all who met her, and Matsuhiro a powerful ruler who had reigned for far longer than his apparent age would suggest, there were many who had flocked to the palace following the ruin of their home, and their frightened voices were hard to rise above. Besides, it only took one dissident - one moment of mischance - to commit regicide.

After he had finished his training, cleaned and dressed himself, he set off to meet his sovereign. He took the long path to the king’s chambers, passing through the kitchens, the eastern guest wings, and finally moving through the great hall. It was there that he realized he may have made a tactical error.

“Oh, Kouji. I knew I would see you here if I waited long enough.”

Kouji internally groaned. His Aunt Kaede, his father’s younger sister, had always been somewhat capricious. She was powerful, as were her older brothers, yet had a sense of humor that verged on the inappropriate. It culminated in uncomfortable encounters that Kouji had no time for. Yet now she was bearing down on him, and there was no escape. He squared his shoulders, grit his teeth, and prayed this would be over soon. “Yes, Aunt? Is there something you need?”

“Stand down, boy. I have a simple enough request.” She smirked at him, raising a perfectly maintained eyebrow. “Your cousin, Sakurako...there’s nothing more that can be done for her at home. She needs to be here, and trained. Not necessarily by you, boy, don’t give me that face. But her power is more than we can contain, even with Tokitou’s trinkets.” Her brow creased for a moment, as she remembered her eldest brother and his recent passing. “God rest his soul. But the matter remains. Will you ask the king if she may come to court?”

Kouji bowed, hoping this would be the end of it. “Certainly, Aunt. Sakurako’s skill with energy would be well appreciated, especially now.” He turned to leave but his aunt gripped his sleeve.

“There’s...something more.” She looked uncomfortable enough that it stopped Kouji in his tracks. “When I say her ability is impossible to contain...there is something we’ve managed to do...” She looked around furtively before dragging him over to a window ledge. Here they would be far enough so that no one could eavesdrop, and anyone watching would think she was merely scolding him, as aunts were wont to do.
“Sakurako...a few years ago we began to suspect her power was not energy. She was acting oddly - one minute she was euphoric, the next raging, the next in tears. Those around her began to sicken, and unless removed from her presence, became seriously ill. Two came within a hair’s breath of dying.” She closed her eyes. “We think her power is life, Kouji. And when she loses control of it, she unconsciously sucks it from all those close to her.”

Kouji’s eyes widened. Such an ability was unheard of, even in their family. The Shihoins had mastered rare and dangerous powers throughout their time as a noble house, and had offered up at least one pure elemental adept - usually with a tendency towards wind - each generation. Yet this...this was truly exceptional. Perhaps there had been more merit in his aunt’s union with the Sakurakouji line than had been previously expected.

He grinned, baring his teeth like the wildmen of the north. “Then she truly must be trained. Even if the king does not take her, I shall. But what did you mean when you said you found a way to contain it...?”

Kaede hesitated, eyes sweeping the room. “There is a boy. One of the farmer’s sons. Your uncle found him two years ago, wandering the village after the demons went through it. They never leave anyone alive...yet somehow he managed to survive.” She sought his eyes and held his gaze. “And not just that - the boy had killed them. Killed them all. Yosuke wasn’t sure until he approached, but then these dark tendrils emanated from him. If the boy hadn’t passed out, your uncle would have died as well.”

Kouji frowned. He knew the signs of those possessed, and knew the devastation they could cause if they were not apprehended. Demons would lie in wait inside the victim, only emerging when they had the upper hand. Yet if the boy were a Carrier, how could such a thing be safe for Sakurako? And how could the boy be anything else?

“Yosuke brought him back. Said he had ‘one of his feelings,’ and that if nothing else, it could be a good test for Sakurako’s powers. If her power was truly life, after all, this shouldn’t kill her.”

Kouji nodded slowly. Clearly, the story ended well, as Sakurako was still alive. Had she killed the boy, then...?

“We laid him in a guest room, and led Sakurako to it. We...well, by that point we knew he wasn’t possessed, at least. Yosuke had an inkling of what he was even then. Regardless, when they met, they fought. There was yelling and clashing, but we couldn’t open the door against their powers. Finally we ran around to the window, but by then it was over. Both were fine - they lay there, tangled on the floor like puppies, their power still sparking in the corners of the room. Since then, they’ve been inseparable.

“The most we can figure is that their powers cancel each other’s out - if Sakurako is life, then the boy is death. And even though we initially downplayed the danger surrounding those with taboo powers, we told her plenty of the scandal that would follow were she to bring a young peasant boy - not a year older than her - to the capital. Either way she refuses to budge. She gets away with it at home, so she assumes she’ll be able to muscle her way through, here. Honestly, we are afraid to press the issue - since we’ve taken him in, his powers have been contained, and so have hers, and neither have shown any ill effects.” She looked up at her nephew, her eyes pleading. “We knew the taboo on demonic powers - death, blood, darkness...but we couldn’t help it. Thanks to the boy, Sakurako is safe. And now she’d do anything to protect him...as he would her.”

Kouji’s dark eyes flickered. “How close contact do they need to ‘contain’ each other?”

“I’m not sure. They don’t sleep in the same room at night, if that is what you’re asking. But they
spend every other moment with each other, so I’m not sure.”

True to his nature, Kouji didn’t waste time thinking of a way to put it gently. “Are they lovers?”

His aunt huffed, an odd mixture of indignance and disappointment. “Unfortunately not! He is handsome young thing, if a bit weedy. But they’re only 14. And if you knew your cousin at all, you’d know that Sakurako is not...the most feminine of girls. She carries her father’s old katana around, simply because she can.”

Well that was promising news. It was a thankful thing the women in his family tended towards tomboys...it provided him with excitement, at the least! “I’m on my way to meet with the king, now. Let me put this before him. In the current situation, we need all the help we can get.”

“Thank you, nephew. We would forever be in your debt.”

Kouji nodded. “Before I go, did the boy have a name?”

“Ahh, yes. He wouldn’t tell us who he was when we found him...or perhaps he doesn’t remember. Sakurako named him Zed. From the western alphabet, I believe. She said it was because his hair was so light.”


He headed off, more determined than ever to meet with the King. Perhaps staying would not be so terrible if he had youngsters of their calibre to train...

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Several hours later found Kouji fresh from his conference with the king, and standing directly outside the queen’s garden. His attitude now, as compared to what it had been earlier, was radically improved. Yet there was a line of uneasiness that ran through his thoughts, and it was this that he had to hide from his cousin. He suspected that she would not be kindly disposed towards the king’s decision, although for her sake he hoped Sakurako was a kind girl, if also a wild one.

The king had been amused at Lady Shihoin’s tale. “Bring the girl here to be trained, then. Especially if she has spirit - what spitfires run in your family! The eldest son exiles himself, leaving behind two energetic daughters of his own; your mother - and you may never tell her this - frightens every man in Japan with her sharp tongue, and now this! Not to mention yourself, of course. The Shihoin line is truly fearsome.”

“And the boy, my lord?” Kouji had glossed over his aunt’s certainty that the boy’s power was over death. Yet it was impossible to hide, and he had voiced her suspicion. The king’s gaze shuttered, yet he had taken no time to announce the boy’s sentence.

“If his power is over death, then you know what must be done. Much as I value both the Shihoin and the Sakurakouji families’ service, I cannot put the safety of the boy over the safety of my
The king’s ready answer made Kouji’s heart skip a beat. Although he did not ask, he suspected the king’s decision applied to the other taboo powers as well - blood and darkness. If that were the case, he would have to move carefully and always keep one eye on potential escape routes.

Kouji was so deep in his remembrances that he almost didn’t sense the door moving outward at a surprising speed. As it was, he only had a moment to react before the doors slammed against the walls.

“I was going to wait for you, cousin, but you were spending such an unaccountably long amount of time staring at my doors that I decided to assist.”

Kouji looked down at the queen’s mischievous smile. She had foregone her facial paint, and he could see the freckles on her cheekbones when she smiled. He smiled in return, yet the light in her eyes dimmed his own. Hikari should no longer show so much joy when she saw him, five months after his return… “Forgive me, my lady. I was lost in thought. May I enter?” He gestured to the bright space beyond the doorway, and Hikari dipped graciously, allowing him through. He took in a deep breath of cool, clear air, generously scented with flowers from all over the world. It was a miracle of horticulture that the effect was pleasant, rather than overwhelming.

She lead him over to the gazebo, hung throughout with roses of every color. She sat gracefully on the very bench she had during her first meeting with her half-sister. Kouji elected to stand, never having felt comfortable in such a feminine bower.

“Well. To what can I attribute this unexpected visit? You never seek me out, Kouji. And you were never fond of flowers.” Hikari tilted her head to the side, and Kouji remembered her as she had been 15 years ago as a young girl running through his mother’s garden. She had loved plants then, but had never been allowed to do something so mundane as dirty herself with mud - her mother had seen to that.

Shaking off the memory, Kouji devoted his attention to revealing precisely what he needed to. “A few things, cousin. First, I bring word from Aunt Kaede - about her daughter, Sakurako. She seeks your leave to bring her here to wait upon you. Would this be acceptable?”

Hikari held his gaze. “There is more to it, is there not?”

Kouji smiled inwardly. Hikari was trusting, yet never wholly believed in anyone. “Her power is somewhat unstable, and she needs training. The king himself has offered to make arrangements. Until she has reached a level of mastery, however, there is an unorthodox method she has employed of curtailing her powers…” He told her of Zed, and their bond. “The boy can function in any number of capacities, yet he needs to stay close to her. It is for both their sakes.”

Hikari drew herself up to her full height. She was not a large woman by any means, yet she had a gaze of steel that could intimidate almost anyone. “I will not condone anything improper. You should know that-”

“Neither will I, cousin. We were raised the same. Aunt Kaede assures me they are only friends, nothing more.”

She nodded. “Then I will look forward to our younger cousin’s arrival. I have not seen the girl since she was quite young. It will be good to have family close by.” She brightened. “Speaking of family...have you heard from Karin? Has the field marshal sent any word?”
The girls were as different as night and day, yet they had come to love each other after only a few months. He supposed it shouldn’t be too surprising - Karin had lost everything, and as an obvious outsider in a strange land was eager for affection and approval. Hikari was just as desperate, having spent most of her life in seclusion. Besides, they were family, and both had been raised to value that over everything else. “She is doing fine. She’s made a friend of Fujiwara’s personal aide - apparently they bicker like children, yet are deadly together on the battlefield.”

When it was obvious nothing else was forthcoming she broke the silence. “And...that’s it?” Her voice rose in confusion. “He didn’t say anything else?”

“What else is there to say? She’s unhurt, fighting well, and has at least one person to talk to.”

“But is she happy? Is she doing well? Are the men treating her with respect? Is she-”

Kouji scowled and cut her off. “They are at war, cousin. Fujiwara has better things to do than worry about her happiness. Besides, if there was a problem, he would tell us. As for her state of mind, you’ll just have to wait a week or two. I can send back a more personal message when I reach their encampment.”

The queen stilled, her hands folding in her lap. She looked up at him with wide, startled eyes. “You...you are leaving then? To the war? But I thought Matsuhiro wanted you here…” She glanced down, clenching her hands together violently. “I...we thought you would stay.”

Kouji looked away so that he would not have to see the fragility in her posture, the hairline cracks in her queenly facade. He had thought that six years away would be enough. Marriage should have fixed the rest of it. Yet this was reminiscent of her plea just before he left, when she had begged him…

...no, he would not think of it. The guilt alone was uncomfortable enough, but to remember such things now was to dishonor them all. “The king and I have already conferred. He believes the dragons are coming, and that I can help Fujiwara’s forces. That, and my skills as a teacher are awful, and I am wasted here in the palace.” Kouji grinned, trying to break the tension. His cousin still held herself apart, yet no longer tried to hide the pain swimming in her eyes. Kouji cursed himself for a fool. Hikari was emotionally weak, especially when she felt abandoned. He should not have tried to make a joke of his leaving.

The queen took a deep, calming breath. “And what of your other duties? Who will protect Matsuhiro and I now that you are gone?” But for a faint glint of desperation in her eye, Kouji would have thought she was fine. As it was he knew she was clasping at straws. He was not pleased with the king for instructing him to tell her personally.

“Those same people who have been protecting you for years. I’m not leaving forever, cousin. Just for a few months.” Or until the threat is utterly annihilated. “Then Karin and I can come home together, and there will be nothing to worry about.”

She looked straight at him and all his self-reassurances were lost. This was the same expression she had worn when he had denied her, and again when he had left two months later. “I do not want you to go, Kouji. Please stay here.”

Kouji closed his eyes against the bitter memories and the sudden urge to run away. “Do not do this, cousin. Not unless you are prepared to tell your husband why you wish for me to stay.” He bowed, not wishing to hurt her any further than he already had. “I will bring your love to Karin, and your best wishes to the men in Fujiwara’s regiment. Until we meet again.” Before she could call him back, he turned and swept from the room, subtly calling upon the air around the door to open it for
him. It was only when the doors had shut behind him and he had made his way down the long halls to the sparring chamber that he allowed himself to relax. By the time he reached the center of the ring, he had done more than relax - he allowed himself to feel what was natural. Anger, for having to relive uncomfortable memories, disappointment for Hikari’s weakness. Yet above all pity that she had not healed as much as he’d hoped, and that she had forgotten less than was wise…

When they were 18, she had sought refuge with him after her third failed omiai. His cousin had grown to be a notable beauty, and her mother had barely allowed her to grow to maturity before throwing her into the path of rich and powerful men. It was due only to Hikari’s unnerving ability to ferret out any past sins that the marriage meetings had all ended in failure - this one was no exception. Her mother was furious, and had Kouji and his mother not been their guests, Hikari would likely have come to harm.

He had found her in the garden, sifting dirt between her fingers. She was quietly crying, and Kouji felt that flash of discomfort whenever he was faced with feminine frailty. Although he appreciated their beauty and form, no woman had yet moved his heart to anything deeper than friendship, and he doubted one ever would. “Hikari. Come back inside. Your mother has been put to bed. It is safe now.”

She glanced at him sidelong, tears highlighting her dark lashes. “It will never be safe. She will never let me go! Father escaped her, but I never will - even when I am married she will always be there, haunting me and my family.” She wobbled as she stood, now weeping in earnest. “I don’t know what to do, Kouji! If I marry, I’ll be free of her but that is exchanging one prison for another...and all of them would make me miserable! I can see them; I know what they have done!”

“Hikari…”

“And even if there was a single honorable man in the pack of thieves and leches she has chosen...it would not matter at all.” She tried to smile, but it was lost amidst her sorrow. “It is already too late. My heart has chosen for me.”

Kouji froze, his mind whirling in panic. Although he paid women little enough attention, he was neither blind, nor stupid. He simply wished he was not the one her heart had decided upon. “Hikari, I-”

Hikari moved closer to him and he stepped back automatically. For a long moment they looked at each other, both with a pained, complicated expression. Finally, Hikari sighed and tried to smile. “I...I know, Kouji. You have no interest in marriage, or in love, or in anything other than battle. But...even if it were simply an arrangement of convenience? Think of it as a way of protecting me! I don’t ask for anything more than that!”

His fear wore off, and disbelief took its place. “I could protect you from your mother, but not from yourself. I will never be the husband you seek, nor the man to give you the love you deserve. Besides, I will be leaving the country soon, and I don’t know when I will return.”

“Then let me wait for you...I can wait until you come home-”

“I could be gone for 10 or 20 years. Possibly more.”

Her pale skin shone like a pearl against the moonlight that filtered through the trees. The tears served only to enhance her beauty, and had Kouji been a different sort of man he might have given in. “I will wait forever, Kouji. I will marry no man other than you...I will love no other man than you. Let me have at least this! Even if you never love me, let me keep on hoping…!”
Kouji loved his cousin, as dearly as any man could his family. Yet he could not love her as a man loved a woman, and his honor demanded he break her heart. “I’m sorry, Hikari, but I can give you no false hope. There is no future for you and I.” And then, as if he had an inkling of what would come, “You are made for greater things than to be the wife of a reluctant man like me.”

Kouji growled as he came back to himself. The time between her confession and his departure had been awkward enough, there was no need to dredge up the memories now. Although it pained him to see her so upset, there was no regret in his heart. When Fujiwara had told him she’d married the king only a few years ago, he had honestly been happy for her. Yet it was obvious now that the shadow of her old feelings for him lay heavily over her heart.

All the more reason to remove himself from her sight, and to send him to where his talents and passion combined. He would leave at dawn, and would, gods willing, reach Fujiwara’s camp by sundown.

Tomorrow would be a glad day.

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The transition from past memories to present was not as jarring this time, largely as Maka had not overused herself to the point of collapse. Everyone came back to themselves within the blink of an eye, no different than they had been this morning save a little hungrier and richer in experience.

It was a combination of these two factors that had Rui vaulting over the arm of the couch in an effort to reach the sanctuary of the kitchen. No one would follow her there, not today. Sakura was firmly wedged between Toki and Yuuki on the couch, and she knew that Toki at least would have the delicacy to keep her from barging in after. Now that she was alone, she could process what they had just seen.

Rui was not stupid. She knew that Kouji was a painfully handsome man, and that many women had made their appreciation known. Although he had not done anything as crass as taken a lover during the years he had raised her, she had always assumed he had loved at least one woman in his lifetime. She had taken it to be the reason there was always a darkness in his eyes whenever he turned the subsequent women down. Yet to see such a beautiful woman beg him to love her and feel him be unswayed…? It presented yet another fear to add to her already crippling shame: perhaps Kouji was correct in thinking he would never love a woman. Perhaps he was unable to. Homosexuality was no sin in her eyes, but she couldn’t help but draw painful parallels between herself and the Queen of Heaven. Both had been hopelessly in love with Kouji. It looked like both loves would result in absolutely nothing.

“You know, I almost didn’t believe him when he told me he’d taken in a young girl. Even less so when he called her comrade.”
Rui whipped around, darkness flying to her fingertips before she realized it would do no good. Shadow had never worked well on Kouji, so why would it work on his cousin? It didn’t stop her from launching herself forward in an instinctive effort to hide her embarrassment. “I... I-!”

Karin raised her palm in a universal symbol to stop. Rui did, jerking to a stop only a foot away. It was not the first time one of her rampages had been halted by the use of someone’s power, but something about this felt different. It certainly didn’t feel like the air around her had hardened...it felt more as if her limbs had stopped of their own accord.

“In all the years I have known him, he has been very, very careful with women. Even children, Rui. He has never let another woman share his table the way he has you...or his home, or his path in life.” Karin spoke quietly with her back to the door. Only Yuuki could have overheard her, had he bothered to listen. “I’ve never known him to be domestic in the slightest, yet he spent more than 10 years with you. Surely you know he cares for you...?”

Something in the woman’s calm demeanor snapped Rui’s control. “Caring for a child and for a woman are...they’re two different things! I may be his comrade, but that’s only because I threw away my femininity. If I took it back now, I would lose what little I have. Just like she did.”

Karin’s eyes softened. “You are not Hikari. Kouji does not think of you in the same way. Hikari could never have fought, never accomplished half of what you have. She would have been so jealous to see someone like you in Kouji’s life.”

Rui leaned back against the counter, shielding her face with her hand. “Yeah, well none of that matters if he’s not looking at women in the first place.”

“Wait, what? No...he’s not gay, Rui.”

“How else could he turn down someone like that?”

Karin bit her lip, as if she wanted to say something but held back at the last moment. “He’s not gay. Trust me on this. He just didn’t love her back.” Her eyes dropped to Rui’s shoulder, where her hair sat just so. “And I don’t understand when you speak of ‘throwing away your femininity.’ Your beauty and grace are obvious, even if you wrap it in leather and whisky. Your hair alone-”

“That! That was...that was for my parents, and-”

“And who was the one who asked you to grow it out, hmmm?” Karin smiled and she leaned back, deftly avoiding Rui’s frenzied headbutt. “Now, now. If he hated your feminine side, he wouldn’t have you emphasize it. And if he didn’t respect your abilities as a warrior, he wouldn’t fight at your side. My cousin can be stupid, but he’s never intentionally cruel.”

Even though she was currently mad at him, the urge to protect those she loved was too firmly ingrained. “He’s not stupid!”

There was something pitying in Karin’s expression when she responded. “No. You’re right. But he is afraid. You’ll see soon enough, but things...did not go well for him. I suppose the same could be said for all of us, but most of all for him. He still blames himself, even though there was nothing he could do.” She smiled gently, before taking Rui’s hand in both of hers. “I will leave you now. I’m sure any advice from me would be worthless - I only met you a few days ago. But I will say this - whenever the two of you are separated, he thinks of you. Whether as a woman or as the girl who calls comrade I cannot say, but you are always in his thoughts.”

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Yuuki is, by virtue of his special ability, an extremely observant boy. Hearing everything, no matter how slight, is a skill that is difficult to turn off. Therefore the dream sequences are odd to him - he cannot use his ability on someone else’s memory, so he is as everyone else. He cannot hear the whispers of the crowd, nor the beating of hearts, nor the hitches in desperate breaths. It is unnerving and a relief when the dreams end. He personally doesn’t see the point of this exercise. History is all well and good, but he is unsure why he and his friends need to know this particular story. Especially if hurts Ruirui, who is his mother figure and secret crush all at the same time.

Yuuki turned his fiercest glare onto Kouji after Ruirui ran into the kitchen. Yet he needn’t have bothered. The samurai looked uncharacteristically subdued, and after a moment of gazing into the middle distance, stood to go after her. He was pushed back down by his cousin, however. A look passed between them, and then Mystery Ladymaru #2 went in his place, slinking through the kitchen door.

He would have gone too if Toki hadn’t grabbed hold of the metal in his jacket and pulled, keeping him (and Nyanmaru between them) tethered to the couch. He shot a look over at his friend, but all he got was a sharp, sidelong look. Ok, then. Apparently, he wasn’t going anywhere.

Hoping to diffuse the tension, Toki tried to start up a conversation with Mystery Ladymaru. It wasn’t going very well. “So, should I call you Aunt, then?”

“No.”

“Why not? You are my aunt, right?”

“We are not having this conversation right now.”

Yuuki tried to get Ogami’s attention, but he was paying very careful attention to the world outside the living room window. Yuuki suspected he was more interested in the reflection, however, especially if his odd angle allowed him to watch Nyanmaru. His suspicion was confirmed when he noticed Nyanmaru wasn’t staring at Ogami, but at the window as well.

“That’s no way to treat your favorite nephew, Aunt.”

“There is nothing but blood between us. Do not treat me with such detestable familiarity.”

Shibuya and Kouji shared a glance before the former slung an arm around the tetchy woman. “Now, now Maka. Toki’s just being friendly! Don’t be so grouchy, the boy is family, after all…”

“Don’t even start with me, Shibuya.”

Next to him, Nyanmaru raised one hand clenching it as if she were stretching it. Yet her gaze never wavered, and Yuuki knew Ogami and his long lost love were staring at each other through the reflection. Two of her fingers twitched, and her eyes cut to the stairwell. After a long moment, Ogami’s eyes closed. Whether in confirmation or in resignation Yuuki couldn’t tell.

“Enough of this silliness! When will you begin training the young ones? They’ve seen enough,
Kouji dragged his eyes from the kitchen door. “Be patient a little while longer, Maka. There’s no point until they’ve seen a little more of what they’ll be up against. Don’t let them get to you.”

Toki leaned forward, his insatiable curiosity getting the better of him. “So why don’t you just show us then? Quit all this backstory and show us the main event!”

“Excuse me, Yuuki. I have to use the bathroom.” Nyanmaru whispered as she stood. Yuuki glanced over at Nisemaru, but the rare kind didn’t seem to be worried. So he let her through, but couldn’t help but notice how Ogami’s eyes dropped from the window the moment she stood. Yuuki could hear how quickly Nyanmaru’s heart was beating as she exited the room, and he knew without question that in a moment or two, Ogami would be getting up after her.

“If our only enemy was Asura, then we would. It’s not that simple~” Shibuya was cut off by the kitchen door opening, but it was only Karin that came through. She was surprisingly unbruised and unbloodied. “How did it go?”

Karin ignored him, making her way over to her cousin. “You’re an idiot, Kouji. Seriously. A complete and utter idiot.”

His eyebrows rose. “What did I do now?”

Shibuya cackled delightedly. “Oh? So the oh-so-perfect Lord Kouji did something wrong? Oh, my. That I have lived to see the day!” He winked over at Toki on the couch. “Live and learn, young ones. Even your elders are imperfect beings.”

“Oh, just shut up Takehiro…”

In all the excitement, no one but Yuuki noticed Ogami slink away up the stairs, ostensibly following Nyanmaru. Yuuki thought about leaving them alone for about two seconds, but then Shibuya glanced at him, and then the stairwell. Ah well. Their reunion had to be more exciting than Kouji’s awkward, non-existent love life… Without a word to anyone, Yuuki calmly walked after his two friends, ignoring the lively battle that was threatening to spill over into the kitchen. He knew how to move quickly and silently, and although his adult frame was hard to hide, he made do, crouching at the top of the steps and peering back over his shoulder to witness the reunion.

Nyanmaru stood with her back to Heike’s door. “Thank you for coming, Ogami. I know that you didn’t want to, but I think it is imperative that we discuss something.” She took a deep breath, and Yuuki wondered at her calm. “Why are you still avoiding me?”

Although his back was to him, Yuuki knew exactly what Ogami’s face looked like, and how ineffective it would be. Nyanmaru had been able to see through his ‘noh mask’ since the very beginning, and it wouldn’t help him at all now. “I am merely keeping to our agreement. It is detrimental for both of us to interact. After this, I will keep my distance, as will you. I thought it only fair to…” His voice hitched, and Yuuki could hear his heart stutter in his chest. “…answer your summons. Just this once.”

Nyanmaru’s voice rose earnestly, just as it had six years ago. Out of all of them, Yuuki thought she was the most unchanged. “Ogami, we don’t know how long this story and the training will take! Of course we’ll have to interact. It…it doesn’t have to be like before, but at least we could be- be friendly.” Ogami’s shoulders tensed, and Yuuki suspected it was to hold them back from taking her into his arms. Although Nyanmaru tried so hard to uphold a brave front, even Ogami had to be able
to hear the pain in her voice. “Besides, what difference is there between interacting with me and watching over me? I know you do it. I can feel you. So why are you allowed to watch over me, and I can’t...I can’t see you?”

“Sakurakouji-san, that is part of my imposed duties, and it is not the same thing—”

She shook her head fiercely. “It’s skirting the line, and you know it. And why can’t I see you? Even just a picture! I understand that we have to live in different worlds now, but doesn’t watching over me break the rules?”

There was a long silence where she searched his face. What she found there Yuuki would never know, but he remembered Ogami’s whispered confession, just before she sealed Pandora’s Box forever - *I will struggle every day just to be connected to you.* Did Nyanmaru not understand his love for her, even now? Even after all he had done for her, and changed because of her?

When Ogami finally spoke, it was hushed and final, and made even Yuuki’s heart lurch uncomfortably in his chest. “It is different. When I watch over you, I can keep you safe. But if I was still a part of your life, there would be nothing I could do to protect you from myself.”

Her heart skittered in her chest, and Yuuki could very nearly hear the tension between them, like the hum of something electric. “I’m a rare kind, Ogami. What exactly do you think you’re going to do to me?” Nyanmaru’s voice was soft yet impelling, and Yuuki felt his own skin heat in response. How would Ogami handle it, when he had loved no one but her in his entire life? “I’m stronger than you think, Ogami. I’ve gone six years without seeing you. I can handle the secrecy, the silence, the time spent apart. I just want to know you’re safe. To know you’re alive.”

Settling against his side without warning was Nisemaru, who could still move as quickly and quietly as he. A warm hand clamped over his mouth, and with the other he held a finger to his lips. Yuuki nodded. Although Ogami wouldn’t liked to be spied on by Nisemaru, Nyanmaru was Nisemaru’s daughter, and he knew he would be worried about her. He was also one of the only people alive who had gone through the exact same thing and suffered from the inevitable consequences.

“I’m not asking for a life with you, Ogami. I know...I know that is impossible. The negation from our blood alone proved that. But I think it is too much to completely cut yourself out of my life—”

Ogami thrust his arms at the wall, trapping her without warning. He loomed over her, closer to her than he had been in over six years. Their breaths became short and quick, and Yuuki wondered if he would hear it when Ogami’s control snapped. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to see you like this? How much I want to—” He choked, glancing in the opposite direction of Yuuki and Shibuya. It was fortunate, as otherwise he might have seen the glaze of sorrow in Shibuya’s eyes.

“Ogami—”

He turned back to her and exhaled slowly. “No. You may be strong enough, but I am not. If I allowed myself...I would not hold back. I could not hold back. I can’t be trusted with you, not when I still bear this cross.”

Nyanmaru reached out for him, bringing her palms to his face. For a brief moment Ogami relaxed into her touch, and Nisemaru stiffened. Yet Ogami did not let the moment last, and he pulled back abruptly.

“I won’t break our promise, Sakura. And...I won’t let what happened with your parents happen with us.” He pulled his hands back from the wall, letting his left hand trail slowly through her hair,
lingering at the ends. He did not kiss the strands, although he wet his lips as he let go. “I will go first. Take your time.”

“Go.” The whisper came Nisemaru, and was far too quiet to have been heard by anyone but him. Yuuki obeyed, but took one last look before he left - Nisemaru broke from cover, passing Ogami in the halls with nothing more than a glance, and a barely perceptible nod. Ogami did not return the gesture. He did not watch as Nisemaru pulled his daughter into his arms, pressing a kiss into the soft dark of her hair.

Then, Yuuki was gone, rushing outside and away from the heartbreak of the past and the present.

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Chapter End Notes

Who is playing Persona 3 and wrote in her favorite bros? ME (RIP Shinjiiiiiii)

Next chapter teaser: Shibuya takes the stage, and taboo powers are everywhere.
Takehiro is, for the most part, a very kind, giving man. He has lived his entire life for his home and his people, throwing away all his personal aspirations to protect them. He has trained extensively, forcing his body past his limit time and time again simply to become strong enough to do keep his people safe. Even so, he is at heart an easy-going man who takes delight in simple things - a well-brewed cup of tea, the rhythm of the rain, making someone laugh.

Yet there are three things he hates, and now he has them in abundance - he hates the kingdom, hates the army, yet most of all he hates power users. They have held power over Takama ga hara for centuries, pushing those without special talent to the wall. They had made life worthless for those even further removed - and if he were ever discovered, he would have to kill himself before he gave up the location and existence of the enclave of his people.

Yet he was not a man for whom hatred came easily, and found exceptions where he could. Fujiwara Hideyoshi had long ago garnered his loyalty from a chance encounter in the forest. Thanks to him, he was able to exercise his abilities and test himself beyond the scope of his home. There was also pride in fighting well for him. Now, the girl was another - although a power user, she was just as powerless as he, and even less liked throughout the army. She was a good reminder that life could be far more difficult than it already is. If he had been born a woman, he would have been unable to do even this much...

She was far too close to discovering his secret, however. She had very nearly done so the night he had tested her, wanting to see if she was worth all the fuss. Now he had to make a decision. Kill her, and make it look like an accident? Or trust her as he had Hideyoshi, and if the worst came to pass, hope no one believed a foreign woman? He didn’t have much time. Fujiwara had petitioned the king for her cousin’s services, and this was the last chance to take care of things. Now that he knew how a wind user could sense him, he could better hide his true ability from this Kouji fellow - but it didn’t answer the question of what to do with Red.

Takehiro’s smile dimmed. It didn’t help that he’d nicknamed the chit. She was a person to him
now, and they did fight rather well together. She seemed like a nice enough girl, and Hideyoshi was clearly torn between making something of her, and protecting her. Yet Takehiro wasn’t just responsible for his own life; the security of all those in the enclave rested on his shoulders as well…

“Shibuya!”

Speak of the devil…he adopted his fake smile just in time, as Karin came bounding around the corner of the sparring ring. The smirk became slightly more natural when he saw her eyebrows crinkle in annoyance. “Don’t make that face. The field marshal was looking for you. We’ve got another scouting mission tonight.” She glanced around and dropped her voice, necessitating the need for Takehiro to lean in close. “If you ask me, he’s sending us on a fool’s errand. Perhaps you can guess as to why he wants us out of the camp tonight.” She grimaced in distaste. “I’m just going to pretend like I have no idea what’s going on. Although I wonder why Fujiwara was so adamant that you had to come with me…”

Takehiro’s grin was strained, but it held. The special forces team had rescued a traveling caravan the other day, and in it was a surprising find - the luscious Madame Tsuki and a bevy of her young charges, all currently being trained in the arts of a power geisha. These were women (and unless he missed his guess, one man, as well) whose power was to beguile; whether it be a secretion of an alluring scent, to the ability to shift one’s features, to the ability to spark pleasure along one’s skin. To express her gratitude, Madame Tsuki had promised the special power users their services for one evening. The field marshal had not been pleased, yet was eventually worn down by the elite corps. His one stipulation was that no one was to approach him, and the two he sent out on a night scout.

“He obviously knows we’re in love, Red. He’s giving us a lovely night alone, while the rest of the camp—”

Her aim was good, and her jab to the solar plexus cut him off before he could finish. “Don’t be crude, Shibuya. Also we are not in love. But why was...well, why was the field marshal so angry when Madame Tsuki offered to see to him personally?”

Takehiro’s eyebrows shot up. So she had known about the salacious offer? Red was blushing slightly, clearly uncomfortable with the subject of sex. Perhaps she was a virgin? He was uninterested, but it was always good to have something on those who could one day move against him. Besides, it warmed his heart to tease her so.

“And yes I know what she was offering. Don’t try to fob me off like that.”

Well, someone was getting rather used to him. And yet she had only hit him once today, and seemed to be expecting an honest response. Interesting. On this, however, he had no reason to skirt the truth. “Our illustrious Fujiwara is an honest man, Red. He takes being the head of his family seriously, and honors his wife and children. To him, it would be an insult to accept Madame Tsuki’s offer, even though she only meant to offer gratitude to he and his men.”

Karin nodded thoughtfully. “I see. And his views on women keep me from...partaking, I can see that.” She cocked her head to this side. “But why you? Is it because we are friends?”

Takehiro’s glib response stuck in his throat. There was nothing but curiosity in her expression - no hidden agendas, no wariness, no awareness that anything between them was false in any way. She truly thought him her friend? By the gods, killing her now would be very difficult indeed. “You don’t like the lovers theory? Well then. Perhaps I am more similar to the field marshal than you think. Or perhaps I am just very picky.” Or perhaps I cannot touch another power user without...
“Or maybe your face is too frightening even for them. I could very easily see this being the case.”

Takehiro nearly flicked her forehead before he realized it was a bad idea. *No physical contact, no physical contact, no physical contact…* “Run, Red. I’ll give you a head start. If I beat you to Fujiwara’s tent, I will make you take last watch.”

She took him at his threat. She raced away, almost before Takehiro had finished speaking. Tonight, he decided, as he watched her take off across the camp. Tonight will decide her fate.

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Back at the palace, a very different resolve was being undertaken by a very different person. Sakurakouji Sakurako stood outside the shoji doors of the queen's chambers, busily twisting the fabric of her western-style dress between her fingers. She was nervous, yet decided. If the queen didn't allow Zed to stay with her they would be away by first light, making their way to the harbor. They wouldn't have much time to board a ship, so she assumed, with the confidence of a young, powerful, teenager, that they could simply steal one. After all, there was no one who could stand up to her and Zed when they fought together, even if she didn't use her ability. All the secret training with her father's weapons master would finally pay off.

Yet first she would try to win over the queen. Although there was a large part of her that thought the adventure would be great fun, she loved her parents very much and knew she would miss them terribly. So she would attempt to be charming, even though she disliked being so. She would smile at the queen, and pretend to be sweet and biddable. If it meant her best friend could stay with her, she would do just about anything.

The doors slid open from inside, and she took one last, steeling breath before walking through them. This was no western chamber; this wing of the palace was modeled in a japanese style. The queen sat on the floor, legs tucked demurely under her, a tea set in front of her. Sakurako bit back a gulp. She was terrible at sitting properly, especially in this dress. She was even worse at the tea ceremony...yet she thought of Zed, and tipped her chin up. For both their sakes, she would not fail.

The queen looked up and smiled welcomingly, and Sakurako felt her skin prickle. They were not five minutes in and the queen was already using her ability on her? It was a thankful thing that she now had some control over her ability. If this had happened a year ago, she would have released her power regardless, unable to keep from rising to the perceived challenge. Instead, Sakurako curtsied politely, like her mother had taught her. She sank to the floor, dropping her eyes momentarily to the tea set, hoping the queen would not ask her to pour.

“You're an odd girl, aren't you? Wary of a tea set?” The queen said it smilingly, to show she meant no offense. Yet to her mind, there was none to take. Sakurako prided herself on her strength and speed, and would have switched genders in a heartbeat. What pride was there in being a woman if her freedom and talents were curtailed?
“That's what I am often told. I'd rather do what I'm good at.” Like fighting, and telling people what to do.

The queen's smile held, yet something flickered in her expression. Rather than remark on Sakurako's bold statement, she reached across and delicately poured them both a cup of tea. Sakurako, who had done anything and everything to avoid domesticity, suspected it was jasmine, but could not be sure. She brought the cup to her lips and sipped in what she hoped was a polite manner. It was quiet enough, she thought.

Apparently the queen did not agree. “I see I will have my hands full with you, little cousin. As will the king with your training – I can see from your comportment all I must do to have you pass as a lady, yet even I can feel your how unstable your hold is on your power. As for the rest... look at me, Sakurako.”

She was helpless to do anything else. The queen's power was not overwhelming, yet it was insidious, and now that she had been in her presence for only a few minutes it was impossible to ignore without a struggle. Yet if she struggled she would throw the game, so she looked the queen in the eye, and hoped she would approve of whatever she found there.

There was no sound from outside, no way to tell how long they sat there. Sakurako did not let her mind wander, as she was unsure of how the queen's power worked, and if it was the mind she could read, or the heart. So she sat and thought of the katas she had been taught, running through the motions in her mind. She waited until the queen leaned back, closing her eyes as if in deep thought. Only then did she allow herself to think about Zed, who was waiting below in the kitchens. Please, she prayed. Please don't send him away. He was the only friend she had ever had in all her 14 years. She was not willing to let him go now.

Finally, the queen straightened and opened her eyes. She smiled widely. “I would be delighted if you were to stay with me, and be as my lady-in-waiting. There is much I and Matsuhiro can teach you.”

Sakurako exhaled slowly. So far so good...but what about Zed?

“In terms of the tenuous hold on your power, my father has sent along one final batch of restriction items. I'm sure we can find something among them to suit you. Of course, you wouldn't have to wear it while training, and once you have a better hold on your ability, you could probably give it up entirely. I'm sure such an arrangement would relieve your parents considerably – they are very worried about you, Sakurako.”

Sakurako's blood ran cold. There had been no need for restrictive items when she was with Zed...did this reflect on her friend's fate? Her heart moved before her mind could hold it back. “Does that mean...but what about Zed? My lady.” She hastily amended, too nervous to dip her eyes as she should have. “Is he allowed to stay? Or will he be sent back home to my parents?”

A mask of calm settled over the queen's face, and Sakurako knew she had been caught out. Sending Zed home had never been an option, as without her there was nothing to combat his own powers. She was unsure of how the restrictive devices would work on him, and at this point in time was unwilling to find out. Yet how the queen answered the question would ultimately decide their course of action.

“That decision is not up to me. The king will judge him, and if he's willing, train him.”

Her mouth was dry, yet the words could not be stopped. “And if he is not?”
The queen bowed her head, setting her teacup back down on the table with a soft clink. “Taboo powers are such for a reason, Sakurako. It was a strange twist of fate that brought the two of you together, yet it could not have lasted forever. I see in your heart that he is a kind boy, and there is less harm in him, perhaps, than in you. I will tell my husband this. But I can make no promises.” She reached forward and took Sakurako's cold hands within her own. “Do not be afraid. You will not be alone here, my cousin.”

Sakurako held her gaze with wide, glittering eyes. If Hikari had attempted to plumb the depths of her heart she would have found nothing but an inarticulate resolve. She did not respond until she ducked her head and pressed the queen's hand lightly. “I understand.”

It was time to run.

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Five hours later, and Takehiro wondered at the efficacy of determination. Case in point Red’s fate - he had decided only five minutes ago to spare her, and then his body went and failed him, leaving him five inches high and at her mercy.

“Sh- Shibuya? May...may I ask why you are suddenly very small and very naked?”

So far, she was taking this surprisingly well. “Would you believe me if I told you it was my lost form?”

Her face was a priceless mixture of confusion and embarrassment. It was also an exact match to Hideyoshi’s face when he had discovered him in precisely the same way. “As you are not a power user, I would have to say no. Unless this is your power. To be small and naked upon occasion.” Her embarrassment finally overcame her curiosity. “Oh for the love of - go find a leaf or something! My eyesight is bad but not that bad!”

Well, maybe he wouldn’t let her live if she was going to be like that. He was perfectly proportioned, thank you very much! Exciting as that argument would undoubtedly be, however, he did as the lady asked and wrapped a small leaf around his midsection. It would have to do until he could crawl into his pocket and retrieve the set of doll’s clothing he had sewed into the lining. He settled in the sleeve of his shirt, wrapping the cloth around his shoulders. The night was cold, after all.

Karin waited until he was finished. “None of this frightens you...so I assume this has happened before? Is this a natural occurrence?” She bent a little so that she could better see her friend. “Will you stay like this for a full day? How on earth do you hide something like this? Or does this not happen very often?”

Takehiro had to speak quite loudly to cut through her stream of questions in his current state. “Calm down, Red! Yes, yes it’s all fine. I wasn’t really joking when I said it was my lost form, after all. And no, it won’t take a full day, there’s a trick to it. But I think we should have a little talk, first.”
“You want to talk when you’re small?” Her head fell to the side and she looked at him with open admiration. “You are brave. You know there are snakes in the forest, right?”

The lady had a point. But he wouldn’t be able to turn back until he had made the serum, and it was incredibly tricky to mix the blood and other ingredients in his ‘lost’ form. If he played his cards right, he’d get her to deliver him to Fujiwara’s tent, where he had some serum already made. First things first, however. “It’s not a matter of bravery. It is a matter of secrecy, though.” He fixed her with a serious stare, something he had done only when they had fought the Carrier. “I need your word, Red. You tell no one, not even that cousin of yours - else I’ll be forced to leave the army, if not be hunted down and killed.” It was a gamble to tell her this way. Yet if she already considered him a friend, then perhaps it was the best way to do it. He’d only known her for a few months, but he’d bet she would react more strongly to the thought of his safety than to threats on her own life.

She hesitated, but only for a moment. “I won’t tell Kouji, or anyone else - it’s your secret to tell. But you should know that the queen is my older sister, and there’s a slight chance she could someday look into my heart and see your secret.”

Takehiro nodded. He had not forgotten about her connections, but he also had not known the extent of the queen’s powers...or that she would use them against her sister.

“Yet if you are afraid, I think I can give you some protection. If she loves me at all, this should be enough to preserve your life. How about it, Shibuya? A secret for a secret?”

“I doubt you have a secret to match mine, Red. But thanks for trying.”

She frowned, but didn’t respond. Instead, she pulled a silver cuff from her left ear, placing it in a pouch on her belt. Then, she pulled out her bowie knife from it’s sheath, laying the sharp tip against the base of her palm. She slowly dragged the blade against the flesh close to her thumb, drawing a line of blood in its wake. The cut was only two inches wide, but it would be enough. She set her knife down, extending the bleeding hand towards Takehiro.

“Watch.”

She twisted her fingers on her uncut hand in a pulling motion, and a thin, crimson ribbon rose toward them. When it reached the other hand she flattened both palms, and her blood stretched like a bridge between them. She held it there for a long moment, until Takehiro turned his attention from the blood between her palms to her face.

“Blood manipulation. A demon’s power. That’s taboo, Red.”

“I know.”

“You’ll be hunted and killed if you’re discovered, no matter your skill with wind...or your connection to the queen.”

She swallowed. “I know.”

He grinned, breaking the solemnity of the moment. “Damn. I haven’t even told you my secret yet. What are you trying to do, upstage me?”

Her lips twitched in an answering smirk, and her relief was evident. She released the blood from her uninjured hand, and it slipped back down to the cut. When she pressed down on it, it appeared to soak back into the skin, and hardened into a scab immediately.

“That looks useful. Can you use it to heal?”
She grimaced. “A little. Just cuts and external injuries - although I can staunch bleeding wounds easily enough.”

He eyed her cut thoughtfully. “Just on yourself? Or can you use it on others?”

She held his gaze, feeling a little silly in such a grave moment with a man five inches high. “Everyone but you. But that doesn’t surprise me; not when I can’t feel you to begin with.”

Takehiro stretched his arms above his head and his leaf slipped. He laughed when Karin blushed. “A secret for a secret, huh?” He winked. “I guess it’s time for the big reveal...”

He told most, but not all - as with Hideyoshi, he would not tell her of the enclave. So he told her of his own skills, his innate ability to negate the powers of others. He told her of the inhuman capabilities he had pushed his body to realize, in order to fool the power users and protect himself. Yet most of all he told her of the way he lived his life, and the discrimination against the ‘rare kind,’ a practice set in place centuries ago.

“They call a person like me a ’rare kind’ because that is exactly what I am. No one knows how it happens, or why I was born this way. Yet in the past the power users hunted the rare kinds down to near extinction, and if my existence were to be discovered, I would face the same fate.”

Karin reacted precisely as he thought she would. “That’s...well, that’s stupid! To judge someone on the basis of ability alone...I suppose I’m biased, but I don’t understand. How can they fear someone like that in this day and age?”

“You’re underestimating my power. I negate all special abilities, without exception. I reduce power users to ordinary warriors, and even then I have trained my body to supernatural strength and speed. Perhaps it’s a side-effect of the rare kinds, to be able to do so.” He shrugged. “There are also tales of rare kinds who surpass even that - they became power vacuums, sucking the ability and even lives from those who stood against them. It was to combat that threat that rare kinds were killed off a long time ago. On one hand, I understand the danger they presented, especially in large numbers. On the other...”

“It’s impossible to be impartial like that when your life is on the line, Shibuya. You have to protect yourself.” Karin told him earnestly, tapping him lightly on the head. “Else I will be very, very angry.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Red.”

“So...you said there was a trick you could do? To turn back?” She smiled ruefully. “It’s interesting that even rare kinds have lost forms...although its far more useful that you can turn back without waiting a full day.”

“Ahh, well. About that - there’s a serum I have to take...but it’s hard to make when I’m this small. You’re going to have to smuggle me into Hideyoshi’s tent. I’ve got some ready made there.”

“The field marshal’s tent? But why...” She trailed off, narrowing her eyes as she pieced it together. “He knows? Ahh, so that’s why he sent you with me...”

Takehiro nodded, and snuggled down into his sleeve. “Hideyoshi knows. He’s also sworn to keep the secret, so there’s no worry there. All we have to do is get to his tent without the rest of the power users seeing us. Since Madame Tsuki has the rest of the men occupied, it shouldn’t be difficult.”

Karin stood, reaching down to pick up Takehiro’s clothes. “All right. Here, I’ll hold you in the
sleeve—just as he hopped into her palm (leaf still securely fastened around his middle) she froze. “Wait. Yes it will too be difficult. I’m a woman! I can’t just waltz up to the field marshal’s tent this early in the morning! Especially when he’s already told everyone to stay away from him tonight.” Even in the darkness Takehiro could see her blush. “Besides, he’s probably asleep. This whole thing is too improper!”

Damn the woman and her infernal modesty! “Red, we don’t have a lot of options. We can sneak in there and get the serum, or we can wait until morning, when you’ll either have to explain where I’ve gone, or show them how small I’ve become. This is our best bet. And if he is sleeping, then it makes our job even easier - he’ll never even know we were there!”

She winced. “I do not think this will end well, Shibuya.”

“Trust me. It’s going to go perfectly.”

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Chapter End Notes

Originally this was the chapter where Code:Emperor was going to be introduced, but due to internal issues I had to cut the original chapter in half. I wanted to keep all chapters below 6K, and although I failed on chapter 5 I will strive to keep them manageable in the future! Regardless, Code:Emperor’s debut is in the next update, which could easily be up before next Sunday (bonus!)

R & R!
Chapter Summary

In which modesty is compromised and the 3 of the Founders come together.

Chapter Notes

I have begun diverging wildly from my original outline. I'm going to try and keep it together, but there were some things that are still up in the air. Largest of these is this: is Karin going to live or die? Kind of a big thing, at this point. Which would you prefer?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1898

It took an unexpectedly small amount of time to implement their escape plan. Especially as it took Sakurako bare minutes to remove herself from the queen’s ladies. She merely put on a little display: the doors opened and shut wildly, and the windows began singing in a discordant tangle. It was enough to send the ladies that attended her running, and then Sakurako was racing down the halls, chasing a thin thread of Zed's power to where her friend waited. It was one of the first techniques they had perfected, so that they could always find each other if they felt their hold on their power slipping...or if either of them entered their lost forms.

He was loitering around the stables when she found him, murmuring nonsense to the horses, who, sensing his ability, shied away from him. It was a long standing disappointment to him that animals feared him. People, he could understand.

“Zed!” Sakurako whispered, in case the king already had people looking for him. She was lucky enough that her friend hadn't already been summoned. “Over here.”

He turned, shaggy hairs whipping over his shoulder. Even after months of practice he was still no good at braiding, preferring to tie back his light hair in a knot at the back of his neck. Privately, Sakurako thought it made him look roguish. He smiled when his eyes lit on Sakurako, yet it was quick to die when he noticed her expression. “It...didn't go well, then?”

She bustled over to him, taking in his long, skinny frame, and the nervous determination on his face. “No. Do you have our things? We have to get out of here.”

“Did they not accept you? I can't believe-”

Sakurako stamped her foot, panic overriding her sense. “There's no time, Zed! The king is going to meet with you, and the queen has no say. She all but admitted he’s going to kill you. We have to go.” She gripped his fingers, wincing at his paper-thin skin, and how the bones seemed to jut right through it. “We'll find someplace better, where you don't have to hide. I promise Zed. I promise.”
He nodded, and returned her grip for just a moment, surprising her with his strength. “I get it, Rako. Let's go.” He released her grip to bend and retrieve her 'borrowed' katana and their bags, slinging the heavier one over his shoulder. It was hers, but neither mentioned it – such was the dynamic of their friendship, and something that was unlikely to change.

They stole off down the rows, grateful for the scarcity of the horses. Another of Sakurako's cousins had recently left for the field marshal's encampment, and had taken a large retinue of cavalry members with him. Had there been more animals for Zed to inadvertently spook, they might have been caught.

Now it all came down to how accurate her father had been: Sakurako had wheedled information about the palace from him, and knew that the stables connected to marketplace. From there they could make their way out the servant’s entrance. It was not entirely deserted, but it was their best option. Initially she had wanted to escape in a blaze of glory, attacking the guards and elite alike as they made their way to freedom, but Zed had put his foot down. He hated hurting people, almost as much as he hated using his power. No matter how often Sakurako tried to make him understand that power was freedom, he was always the voice that held her back when her blood started to boil. Perhaps it was why they meant so much to each other, even beyond their innate ability to negate the other's power.

With his height and his hair color, sneaking was hard for Zed. They had packed a cowl they had stolen from the christian monk who had passed through her father's lands, yet that was nearly as outlandish. It there had been time, they could have found another for her, or even a full set of robes. She suspected they would be easier to move in than this horrific dress. Still, it was something, and so she pulled him down, draped the cowl over his head, and ran through the doors at the end of the stable into the sunlight...

...where they were promptly discovered. “Lady Shihoin? What are you doing outside of the palace?” The slow-witted servant took another moment to ponder, eyes shifting from the lady to her friend.

Sakurako didn't wait for realization to dawn. She unsheathed her katana in one fluid movement, and brought down the handle on the back of his head. Her aim was good and the man slumped to the ground, unconscious. She ignored Zed's gentle smile, and looked away as she sheathed her blade. “It would simply take too long to wipe off the blood.” Stupid Zed, with his stupid pacifism...

“I'm sure.”

Thankfully for Sakurako's embarrassment there was no time for further debate. They took off towards the exit, Sakurako struggling to keep up with Zed's long strides. There were others that saw them and called out, but the market was just beginning its afternoon rush and they were able to shake off any pursuers. They pushed their way through the servants and craftsmen until Sakurako's dress was caught on a loose nail from the back of an artisan's stall. Without a moment's hesitation she cut herself free, bemoaning the ignoble use of her blade rather than the destruction of her dress. If anything, it was far easier to move now, and that was something to relish.

They tumbled through the door in a heaving rush, slamming it behind them. They looked around for something to block it, just to buy them some more time. Zed had just pointed towards a large rock that Sakurako could animate and persuade to move when a voice at her left interrupted them.

“Well, aren't you youngsters in a hurry. Running away, are we?”

The teens whipped around, instinctively falling into defensive positions at the wall of power that washed over them. In all their young lives they had never faced anyone like this - power radiated
from the man like a forest fire, burning the air in front of them and bringing moisture to their eyes. The very air around him seemed to spark, and brash as she was, Sakurako could easily determine this man was twice her strength, if not more so. Curiously enough the thought did not cow her - it made her body sing with excitement. It was this that gave her the courage to respond so brazenly. “If it’s all the same to you, sir, we’d rather not respond.” She flicked her wrist, spinning her blade. “Is that going to be a problem?”

True to form, Zed had other ideas. “No, Rako! We have to run - we can’t stay here!” He glanced back at the door, shimmering through the haze of his hastily erected barrier. “They’ll be through any moment!”

“Well, we can’t have that, now can we? Not when I’ve found something so interesting…” Their obstructor rubbed his chin, hand bristling over the stubble. Dark, sharp eyes focused on them, and Sakurako felt as if their worth had been measured and found wanting. Yet then his lips curved in a lopsided grin, and the danger they had reacted to increased. In response, Sakurako ducked her head and tried to calm her heart, which was pounding an irregular rhythm in her chest. He blocks our path to freedom, she told herself. And this is the greatest challenge I could have asked for…

Beside her, Zed let out a cry. Yet it was not from any physical injury - the shadowy barrier had been burned away and replaced with a wall of blue flame. It flickered like a sapphire in sunlight, yet even from where she stood she could feel its heat.

“Rako, be careful. It’s not normal fire. And there’s something familiar about it…” Zed was cut off by the stranger’s opening salvo - a sheet of flame shot between them, leaving them barely enough time to leap back.

“Worry about that later, kid. Right now, your opponent is me.”

Sakurako grinned as she dodged. “Let’s show him what we can do, Zed!” She ducked a whip of flame that came close to searing off the top of her skull. She parried another with her blade, grunting under the impact. Yet it was not for this purpose that she had honed her martial skills - she would leave her blade for a more fitting opponent. So she focused on the spark of life humming within her breast, imagining it as light that could extend to her fingertips. Once done, her fingers began glowing with a blinding white light, and she had to drop her katana to avoid infusing it with life energy.

Now she could fight as he did, power to power. It was just in time- he sent another whip of flame straight at her chest while the previous two honed in on either side. Her skill with the katana was not enough to defend from all three, yet with her ability she could. She simply grabbed the flame rushing towards her chest, pulling herself forward so that the whips behind her crashed into each other. The power coursing through her hands protected her from being harmed; without it she would have been burned alive. Her escape was narrow enough for her to feel the effects of the heat, however. As it was, the air filled with the scent of scorched hair.

Yet now she was within range. She dodged the backlash of the whips, concentrating on forming a protective helm around her head from her power. She couldn’t encase her body completely, yet, but this would have to be enough. Light sparked between her palms, and with one hand fending off the persistent flame, the other raised in her first offensive attack.

While Sakurako was battling off the effects of one hand, Zed was dealing with the other. Their opponent possessed an enviable skill in facing the both of them with no difficulty, fighting two separate battles at the same time. Towards Zed he sent walls of flame, which Zed could only deflect by immersing himself in his own dark power. Using his ability such was dangerous, as it lead to his lost form more quickly than any other technique. Although he was obviously reluctant
to fight, he was left with no other choice. Going into his lost form now could be catastrophically bad, seeing as Sakurako was currently fighting for her own life… Having found his resolve, he too charged at their enemy, closing in on him at precisely the same moment Sakurako lifted her arm to strike.

Their efforts were in vain. The stranger lifted his arms, and both teens found themselves hurtling backwards. Sakurako groaned as she propped herself up on her elbows, glancing over at Zed as she did.

What she saw made her swear. “Fuck! Zed, no!”

Darkness was converging upon him, and his papery skin was already melting away. Although his face was still recognizable, his eyes had sunken in, and several of his fingers were now more bone than flesh. Unlike most other power users, Zed’s descent into his lost form was a slow transition, and they had found his power was magnified during these times. Yet the inevitable loss of his powers - leaving him as a corpse for 24 hours - was too high a price to pay when they were on the run. Especially if they were chased by someone who could shrug them off as easily as man could a fly!

Their opponent sighed dramatically. He held back his attack and Sakurako’s blood boiled at the mockery in his tone. “Lost form already? That’s no fun…”

Without taking his failing eyes from the fire adept, Zed whispered out of the side of his mouth, just loud enough for his friend to hear. “Run, Sakurako. I’ll hold him off.”

Did he really think she would simply leave him here? He always picked the worst time to be heroic…! Deciding that pain - or even death - was preferable to losing her friend through his own misguided sense of valor, she turned her back to the stranger. She fell to her knees and threw her arms around Zed.

“Rako, no!”

“Ehh? There’s no time for love in battle, little girl-”

Sakurako ignored all this. She focused every ounce of her concentration on the life energy that pulsed within her. Imagining it as lighting a candle, she willed the energy out of her body and into Zed’s. This had never worked before. Zed’s power always offset hers, for good or for bad. Yet they had never tried this when he was fading into his lost form, and never with their lives on the line. If ever she was to be successful, it had to be here and now, otherwise it wasn’t just her life. It was his.

The candle’s light flickered in her mind, and she groaned in an effort to keep it alight. She had to work harder…! Zed was more than halfway to his lost form, and she could feel the brittle skin against her cheek slowly knit into the bone. At this rate, if she couldn’t do it…

No! I will not lose! Desperation fueling her resolve, she did something so unexpected that it surprised even herself. Perhaps their enemy’s taunt about love filtered through her consciousness, or more likely still she remembered her mother who often claimed that life began with a kiss. Whatever the reason, Sakurako turned her head and pressed her lips up against Zed’s cheekbone, and with this action her power flared. Her mental candle became a bonfire, and for a brief moment she could feel not only the life within her, but in the world around her, as well. Yet the sensory overload was too much, and she fell forward onto Zed’s lap, registering dimly that it wasn’t hard bone she fell onto, but warm flesh.

For moment she drifted in that grey, halfway state at the doorstep of unconsciousness, but the
sound of slow applause dragged her back to waking. Zed’s body tensed underneath her and she felt his skinny arms wrap around her, trying to protect her. “Stay back! I’ll kill you!”

Even though she wasn’t facing him, she could hear the delight in the stranger’s laughter. “You can certainly try! But we’ll leave that for another time. I’ve seen enough for now.” He laughed again when Zed still didn’t let go of her. “Enough, boy! I’m not going to hurt either of you. Flames of Perdition, I’m not about to kill off this kind of talent when it’s taken me this long to find!”

That caught Sakurako’s attention, even though she was suffering from an uncomfortable mixture of vertigo and fatigue. Overusing her power left her mind spinning, and it was difficult even to walk after a surge. Yet she could feel Zed tremble, and it was up to her to take charge. She twisted around so that she could face their attacker. “You- you’re not? Even though his power is what it is?”

Oddly enough, the man was still smiling. It was a great, jagged grin that seemed to take up half his face, and exuded recklessness. “Like I give a shit what the kids power is! The kid’s got potential, and so do you. Life’s too boring to worry about stupid things like death. So I’ll train you a bit, and then we’ll see if you guys can take me on for real. What do you say?”

Zed sputtered above her. “But...but the king...I mean, we’re running away for a reason-”

The stranger shrugged. “Leave the king to me. Old man owes me, anyway.”

Sakurako could practically feel Zed goggle. “Owes you? How-what...old man?” He looked around nervously, as if this, of all that just transpired, was enough to damn them. “You know the king?”

“Wouldn’t say it if I didn’t.” He rolled his shoulders, and then cracked his neck. “Anyway. Name’s Kyo. Although I’d be fine if you wanted to tack a title onto that- master, king, emperor...heh, kinda’ like that last one...”

Sakurako sat up so quickly she nearly fell over again. “Kyo- but that’s- that’s the name of the king’s...” She choked at his glower, and remembered the rumors of the king’s dangerous, illegitimate son. She should have realized it soon as the blue flame had burst from his fingertips - only a chosen few from the line of kings could command the flames of hell. To be able to wield his father’s power, Kyo must be even stronger than rumor had it.

“Like I said, I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. So? You gonna’ train with me or not?”

If he was the king’s son, he’d likely have the personal and political power to protect Zed - he could take him on as an attendant, and the majority of the palace would be none the wiser. Of course, the king was a different story. “You swear you can protect him? Even if your father orders his death?”

“Did you not just listen to how I said he owes me? And he owes me big, little lady. Marrying that wallflower half his age, and then having the gall to say any child with her would be the heir? I’d like to see him try - none of his kids will have the right flame, and he knows it. So he’s gotta’ keep me happy, else the kingdom will fall. Kid’s safe, girlie. Don’t worry about it.”

Sakurako glanced at Zed, just to confirm what she already knew. “Then we accept. With thanks.”

Kyo smiled, and it was the smile of the devil. “Oh no, little lady. Thank you.”
Shibuya’s plan did not go perfectly.

It wasn’t difficult to find a way past the distracted guards outside Fujiwara's tent, although Karin had suspected it might. Shibuya snuck past the guards in order to undo the ties holding the door closed. After that, it was simply a matter of using the wind to mask the sound of her movements, and using the ambiance of the world around her. She was particularly helped by a timely, masculine moan coming from the closest tent which drew the attention of both guards. One took a few steps towards his friend, muttering something suggestive about someone named Junpei, and that was all the opening Karin needed to duck into the field marshal's tent. It was then that they ran into the first of the great troubles when they discovered that the field marshal slept half naked.

Shibuya gripped Karin's thumb in alarm when she spun away from the sleeping man, making a quiet, yet distinctively surprised noise. If he hadn't, he would have been flung across the room. Yet there was no way to reprimand her now – he'd lay into her about her maiden bashfulness later, now was the time to get the serum. So squeezed the tip of her thumb, hoping she would get the message.

Without turning around, she glanced down at him and pointed around the room. Where? She mouthed, eyes never turning to the man on the bed. Shibuya inwardly scoffed. If this was her first time seeing a man shirtless, she had a lot to live for. He pointed to the ground, knowing she wouldn't like where he had stashed the serum – in a satchel under the bed.

Once on the floor, he scurried beneath the bed, pausing only once when Hideyoshi turned over in his sleep. A quick glance back at Red confirmed that she had heard it – her shoulders were up by her ears, and even in the dim light he imagined he could see the tips of her ears burning. Yet then he was under the bed, wishing that the tent's thin walls let in a little more light. It would be an ordeal trying to find the satchel in the dark.

“...ocean-”

Takehiro and Karin froze. The voice, although indistinct, was undoubtedly Hideyoshi’s. When nothing else followed they both relaxed. Who knew the field marshal dreamt of oceans? If that had been all, they might have continued on and completed their mission successfully. Unfortunately, a disgruntled mouse took fate into its paws: the rare kind had stumbled into its cache of food, and with a furious squeak it attacked the intruder. Takehiro, man among men, demon killer, and scourge of all power users everywhere, squeaked like a little girl.

“Yeep!”

The field marshal awoke immediately, rolling to the side before calling upon his power to twist the metal knobs on the lamps. Karin, not knowing why or how Takehiro could even make such a sound, dropped into a defensive position. As soon as the lights flicked on they froze, staring at each other with identical shocked expressions. Beneath the bed, Takehiro winced guiltily as he flung the mouse away from him. He doubted that Red would ever let him hear the end of this.

The field marshal regained his composure first, although he blinked hard as if to clear his mind of dreams. “Kar-Shihoin. What is the meaning of this?”
By now it was obvious that there was no real threat and Takehiro suspected that Red was thinking very dark thoughts about his imminent demise. “I...I humbly apologize, Field Marshal. It was...there was...” She was obviously trying to find a reason that did not implicate her friend. He suspected she would have had a better time of it had Hideyoshi been wearing a shirt. As it was, she couldn't even bow before continuing. “We scouted the area, but there was no danger. But then-”

There was something more than simple sleep-deprivation in the grating tone to the field marshal's voice. “And so you make your report in the middle of night, alone, in my tent?” He did not have to verbally express his disapproval, it was evident in the hunch of his shoulders and the dripping sarcasm in his tone.

Yet Takehiro had just stumbled against the satchel, and it was the work of a moment to extract the serum within it. Now to pop the cork without spilling a drop...

“No, not a report, and maybe not alone either...”

“Make sense, girl!”

Karin reached her boiling point the same moment Takehiro dislodged the cork from the bottle. “I would if you would put on some clothes, sir!”

Takehiro dipped his finger in the serum and felt the effects immediately. Fujiwara's response was lost when the bed tilted upward, nearly spilling him to the floor. Full-sized, Takehiro grinned. “Ahaaa...Sorry, Hideyoshi. I went small when we were out on patrol, and I thought it would be faster to use the serum I’d already made. Don’t worry, neither of us did anything strange to you when you were asleep. And Red – you are awful at this. Leave the wiles to someone more capable, hmm?”

Her face was crimson, and he wondered if she couldn't learn to direct the flow of blood within her own body. It would spare her the blushes, at least. “You- I...What did I tell you about being naked?”

“You're going to have trouble finding leaves big enough for me now.”

She nearly shrieked in indignation, but she caught herself and brought it back down to a whisper. She shut her eyes tightly, and pointed with perfect accuracy at her friend. “Put. On. Pants!”

Shibuya huffed and placed his hand on his hips. “Well. I don't remember you being so upset about it when I was small.” He smirked. “I suppose I am more impressive at my normal proportion-”

“Takehiro.” There was more danger now in the field marshal's clipped tones than in his entire interaction with Red. “Do as the lady requests.”

Knowing his time for fun was over, he acquiesced easily. “Yes, sir.” Takehiro gestured to the bundle at Karin's feet, and she kicked it towards him. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Hideyoshi leaning over and belatedly procuring a shirt of his own.

“I will be upset about this in the morning. Consider yourselves officially reprimanded, in the meantime.” The field general stood and cracked his neck. When he looked away, Takehiro winked at Karin, whose cheeks still bore faint traces of a blush. A suspicion took root, deep in the back of his mind, but it was still too early to confirm.

“We’re sorry, Field Marshal. It won’t happen again.” Red spoke confidently, and Takehiro cocked his eyebrow. It wouldn’t? That was news to him... “From now on we can keep some of the serum in my tent, and that way we can access it in case of emergencies. Then we wouldn’t.”
“Absolutely not.” Fujiwara’s firm dismissal stopped him before he could agree. The field marshal folded his hands across his chest. “While such a suggestion may seem practical, it is improper. He will simply have to be more careful in the future.”

The denial was expected, but the vehemence was not. “Hideyoshi, you know I can’t control when it happens. And you also know I would never do anything untoward to her! Trusting her with who I am should be proof enough of that.” He waited for Fujiwara’s stiff nod before continuing. “There would be nothing improper about this. This would be only for those times when coming to you isn’t feasible.”

“It’s not like anyone would see him, either. He’d only need it when he’s small, and he’d be easy enough to hide.”

“Precisely! I could even ride in her pocket, unless that’s too close to her womanly hips.”

“Takehiro-”

“My hips aren’t womanly…” Karin caught herself. “I mean…and this way I wouldn’t have to commit the impropriety of barging into your tent at all hours, Field Marshal. Isn’t this a better alternative?”

She tilted her head to the side, and Takehiro swallowed back a snicker. If he hadn’t been able to convince Hideyoshi, there was no way Red was. The two men had been, if not quite friends, trusted associates of each other for several years now. She didn’t stand a chance-

“Perhaps...perhaps you are correct. I don’t like it, but…” Fujiwara turned to glare at the rare kind. “If I hear a whisper of anything scandalous, I will hang you both out to dry like laundry. I can turn a blind eye towards the indiscretions of the others, but not you two. There’s too many eyes on you both as it is. Do you understand me?”

They both nodded. Both had their own reasons for staying aloof and out of the camp gossip. Rumors of romance would only bring them under suspicion, and leave their secrets closer to discovery.

“And before I forget. Lord Shihoin arrived at the camp a few hours ago. I normally would have you wait until morning, but seeing as how you’ve already established a habit of barging into men’s tents…” Fujiwara trailed off, biting back a small smile of his own at Karin’s transparent happiness. “You might as well go wake him up, this time. Ah, but first-” The field marshal strode past them to the opening of the tent. It was the work of a moment to open the flaps and step out into the pre-dawn chill.

Takehiro and Karin exchanged a puzzled glance, but their confusion ended when strains of Fujiwara’s conversation drifted in through the tarp. “…expect you to guard, not daydream...scouts returned...go and look!”

Karin smiled sheepishly at the amazed men when they poked their heads in to see, but Takehiro was far more brazen - he turned to the side and patted his rear end in a mockery of a parent’s punishment. Thankfully the men withdrew immediately, red faced and sputtering. This way they didn’t see the scouts' delighted grins.

Fujiwara re-entered the tent a moment later, nodding to Karin. “Go on, Shihoin. He’s in a lone tent, on the east grid-”

“I can find him. Thank you, Field Marshal!” She bobbed up and down, bowing as quickly as if she
were a rare kind herself. With one last smile directed towards both men, she hustled out of the tent.

Takehiro pouted. “Why does she get to be alone in her cousin’s tent, huh? If it’s such an *impropriety* for me to be in hers?”

Fujiwara fixed him with a quelling stare. “Don’t be silly, Takehiro. They’ve lived together for years, and traveled alone for months without scandal. Besides, he’s her legal guardian, and Kouji’s honor is beyond question. Unlike yours.”

“You’re lucky I’m such a forgiving man, Hideyoshi. A lesser mortal might take offense.”

“Indeed.” The field marshal yawned. “So you’ve told one Shihoin. Will you tell the other?”

Takehiro dropped his playfulness so quickly it was as if it had never existed. “Absolutely not. Red is enough, and even then it was only out of necessity.” *Mostly.* “I don’t know her cousin from Adam. At least I trust Red.”

“And the danger you have placed her in means nothing to you?”

Takehiro eyed the field marshal carefully. Hideyoshi was back to being in a bad mood, and while it was understandable, he couldn’t be sure whether it was solely due to being woken in such an unconventional manner...or if it was something else. “I’ve told her her what I’m capable of.”

“And that the punishment for withholding information on rare kinds is death? Did you tell her that?”

“Yes, Hideyoshi. I told her all that. Believe me, it’s not like I *want* to put the girl in danger. Neither do I want to endanger her cousin. See? I’m noble. You may praise me now.”

Fujiwara shook his head, dark hair spilling past his shoulders. “I don’t know how you’ve lived this long, Takehiro.”

“Honestly? Neither do I, sir.”

“...Just get out of my tent.”

“Yes, sir.”

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Chapter End Notes

Did anyone else wonder what Sakurako’s power transferral via kiss was about? Man, I did.

...
Code:Emperor was named after Kyo, from the mangaka's earlier work Samurai Deeper Kyo. Because I felt like it. Homage!

Just for fun, I made up a photobucket up of the actors I "envision" playing these crazy people. For manga characters we already had an idea, but I thought it might be fun to put up the OCs. And then I went nuts and put up everyone. So go ahead, knock yourself out (suggestions are always welcome) : Code:Beginning

Next chapter teaser: Fujiwara's triumvirate is established, and two of them face a dragon.

Thanks for reading!
Heroes

Chapter Summary

In which a dragon is brought down and a dark seed is planted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

1898. 2 weeks later

Takehiro never knew what Karin told her cousin about him, but it smoothed over their introduction immeasurably. He had been prepared for all manner of awkwardness, yet upon their introduction Lord Shihoin had sized him up within a matter of minutes. What clinched it was the field marshal’s claim that he moved faster than the wind.

Oh really? Kouji had asked. Show me.

Their spar lasted nearly three hours, and had they been taking it seriously, both would have died four times over. Of course, Takehiro couldn’t use his trump card as he could with Red, but Kouji was far more skilled in the art of combat than she. That being said, he couldn’t remember the last time he truly feared for his life in the middle of a sparring match. It was wonderous.

There was the inevitable awkwardness when Kouji went through the same period of disconcertion that Red did, as he was better at sensing through the wind than she. Yet his claim that he was wearing one of his Shihoin Tokitou’s specialty restriction items worked, backed up as it was by Red and Fujiwara. Besides, Takehiro didn’t think the notion of an item that was based off the theory of the ‘extinct’ rare kinds was a bad idea to begin with. Either way, Kouji hadn’t cared. He had been provided with an excellent sparring partner, and so he asked no more questions.

That was all it took to cement their triumvirate. Although Kouji’s strength and lineage gave him immediate popularity throughout the camp, he chose to spend the majority of his time with his cousin and Takehiro, sparring, training, and baiting the greener recruits. Their group dynamic was different now, but that was only to be expected. Now he had Red to tease and Kouji to test himself against, and when all three were together they got along surprisingly well.

Best yet was that he could see them spar against each other, putting him in position to analyze their strengths and weaknesses without revealing his own. He had to admit that watching them fight excited him: Kouji was a weapon of destruction, whether in terms of martial ability, weaponry, or his power. Yet he was not simply raw strength - he was a skilled tactician, adeptly exploiting his enemy’s weakness, and concealing his own. Red was good, and reflected much of his teachings, but she simply did not have the firepower Kouji did. She fought with dual daggers rather than a single blade, and while at times her speed gave her a slight advantage, it was offset by Kouji’s ruthlessness. Even in terms of special power he was superior, although he noticed that he usually used his power in defense or to boost his physical skills, whereas she tended to use the wind as a weapon. He wondered how much of that was specific to their hold on their power, and how much was out of fighting style, or physical necessity.

He also wondered how their fights would end had Red been free to use her other ability. She had
mentioned them experimenting with it in the past, but hadn’t said much more than that. He finally got his chance to ask after she was defeated in a public bout in front of Fujiwara and his elite corps.

After landing the finishing blow, Kouji helped his cousin to her feet. She wobbled, but stayed up. Across the ring, Takehiro could see the frown on Hideyoshi’s face - whenever he watched Karin fight he always scowled, no matter the outcome. On one hand Takehiro could sympathize, as he knew how strongly Hideyoshi felt about protecting women and children, and how little he liked a woman at the front lines. On the other, a dragon had wrecked two villages in the last week and they needed all the firepower they could get. Personally, Takehiro couldn’t care less - some of the most terrifying women he knew were women, and he suspected had the king known of them, he would send them to the front lines to chase their enemies back to hell.

The Shihoin cousins bowed to each other, and while Kouji walked off to greet Fujiwara and his men, Red made a beeline for him. He anticipated her question, and bit back a question of his own when she had to grip the ring’s barrier with bloodless knuckles to remain upright. “You let him go after your left side, again. You’ve got to be more ruthless, Red. Otherwise he’ll keep drumming you, without letting you use the wind to your advantage.”

She pulled a face, but didn’t argue. The stood together for a moment, watching the elite power team congratulate Kouji. Finally, he asked. “Have you ever beat him?”

She turned her head but didn’t look directly at him. “Yes.”

“Without using…?”

“...No.”

He had expected as much. “And when you do...you know, how often do you win?”

She shrugged. “I don’t exactly know, Shibuya. Maybe half the time? But we’ve never gone all out - we’ve only worked on a few ideas, turning them into techniques.” She hesitated. “Using it...makes me go a little crazy. It’s just too hard to control.”

Takehiro watched her for a long moment, weighing his options. As he came to a decision, he suddenly had a better appreciation of how Fujiwara felt when watching her battle. It could be simple dislike in his grimace, but perhaps it was all to mask his worry and resignation… Takehiro had known from the beginning that as a non-person, he was ultimately a tool used to protect the kingdom. He had not realized that she was as well.

Yet this would be to her benefit. Perhaps it might save her life. “Well, next time we have an evening off, I think we should go find some place a little more private. We can work off some of that frustration.” He kept his face carefully solemn, but couldn’t help the glint of mirth in his eye.

Karin, who was suitably used to her friend’s teasing, simply sighed. “Not now, Shibuya. I have to reflect on the match. Are you sure you can’t give me anything more specific? Like my footwork? Or my form?”

He frowned, reflecting back on the days when it was so easy to make Red blush. Now, the only thing that seemed to work was going small, or more appropriately, going naked. “Awww, Red, you’re not thinking about the possibilities- what can we do when we’re alone? At night? At a secluded location where no one is around to see us…? “Ugh, unless you’re talking about sparring, I don’t want to hear…” She looked over cautiously, reading his smirk in a new light. “Oh. Oh. I see. But…are you sure it’s ok? Is it safe?”
He glanced over at Fujiwara, who was - as always - glaring. Probably at them, because he always assumed they were flirting. For a man whose honor was so deeply entrenched that it bordered on religious fervor, he sure was quick to assume the salacious worst. “It is as long as we’re careful.”

She glanced around nervously. “But what if I hurt you?”

“Please. Remember what I am? This is our best chance to really spar. Besides, don’t you want to know what it’s like to hold nothing back? To see what you can really do? To win?”

That had done it. Her competitive nature had caused her to agree immediately, and since then they had found time to spar three times. The first of these furtive training sessions was spent breaking down Red’s fears, and practicing the techniques she had learned with Kouji. It was challenging, but nothing he couldn’t handle. The second was far more dangerous, and at the end they were bloody and thoughtful. I want to try something, she had told him. Something that will work on everyone but you. She hadn’t explained, and he hadn’t asked. It was obviously something he wouldn’t be able to help with.

Yet a week ago the scouts had found deep grooves in the earth, as if a giant had dragged iron shoes over the turf. Coupled with uprooted trees and spoor the size of an end table, they had stumbled across the trail of an earth dragon. Since then there had been no more time for sparring, and last night they had finally tracked the dragon back to a cavern that lead to a series of underground tunnels, where the dragon ostensibly made its home. They had not explored the tunnels, as to do so meant death, even to the elite corps. So they waited for it to emerge, camping half a mile off and preparing the all-out assault.

While the elite corps would lead the assault, the rest of the army would hamper it on all sides. Fujiwara would direct the main troops from the rear, as his power over magnetism was almost worthless this deep in the forest. Takehiro and Karin’s role was goad the monster into place, nipping at its heels and side as they lead it to Kouji and the elite corps. While it was a dangerous role to play, it was not nearly as dangerous as Kouji and the elite team’s role. Takehiro would have been insulted at this slight to his capabilities, but he knew Fujiwara’s reasoning - the further Takehiro stayed from the elite corps, his secret would be better preserved.

So he had accepted the role, without a murmur of protest. Red had as well, promising to meet him at Fujiwara’s tent on the eve of battle. Yet dusk was falling, she was thirty minutes late, and nowhere to be found even after he started searching for her. He had even discreetly checked her tent, although he knew Fujiwara would have choice words about that. Rather than search the entire damn camp he made his way to the field marshal’s tent, deciding that Hideyoshi would either know where she was, or her whereabouts were to become his problem.

Yet Fujiwara wasn’t there either, and Takehiro was beginning to sense a conspiracy. For both of them to be missing one the eve of battle…? It was unheard of, especially since-

Muffled yet familiar voices coming from Kouji’s tent caught his attention, and he snuck closer to listen in. “How long now?”

“10, 12 hours? It’s hard to know for sure-”

Takehiro held himself flush against the tent, taking care not to touch it. Through a small tear in the material he could see Kouji and Hideyoshi standing close, glancing over to something just out of his vision. Their faces were grim, and Takehiro could practically feel the field marshal’s frustration. “And of all nights it has to be this one! This changes everything - Takehiro can’t harry the creature alone. I’ll need to assign another power user to take her place. She’ll stay back with me.”
“She could regain her powers as soon as 8 hours from now. Should she join the battle then?”

Hideyoshi hesitated, and glanced over at what Takehiro was willing to bet was Red, in her lost form. He was suddenly filled with insatiable curiosity. What was it? She had never told him, and the possibilities intrigued him. It seemed nothing too out of the ordinary, as both men were taking it in stride.

Takehiro’s musings were cut off by Hideyoshi’s response. “No. I’ll keep her in reserve in case of emergencies. More importantly, who should I assign to fight with Takehiro…?”

“Why not send Kouji? It’s the most obvious choice - he can more than make up for me.” Red’s voice was slightly muffled, although it was more likely due to distance, rather than any lost form specifics. “He’ll fight well with Shibuya. Frankly, if it’s them, we might not need the rest of the army at all.”

Shibuya couldn’t help but smile at her faith. Sometimes, she acted every inch of 18. Although he wasn’t much older, it was nice to know someone believed in them and wasn’t afraid to voice it.

“While I appreciate the thought, I need Kouji-”

“Enhh, why not? I think it sounds like fun.”

Takehiro had never seen such a bewildered Hideyoshi. Neither had he expected the look of unholy delight Kouji wore. “I must admit, Field Marshal, that I’d like to see how the two of us do against the dragon. What harm is there in us taking it out ourselves?”

The man had to be crazy. Certifiably insane, to face such a daunting challenge and be so enthusiastic. Then again, maybe the madness was catching. Just the thought of facing the dragon and holding nothing back caused Takehiro’s body to thrum with excitement.

“And the possibility of dying means nothing to you?”

“We’ll pull back if things get rough. But what is the army going to do that we can’t? We’re the best you have, Fujiwara. Why not leave it to us?”

“They’ll win, Field Marshal. It will take more than a dragon to take them down!”

Takehiro watched Hideyoshi’s shoulders rise, and his hand rise to his temple. Yet by this point the rare kind knew he was convinced. Gainsaying Kouji was incredibly difficult, and not just because of his family’s power. The man was dangerous and confident, and when he looked at you in that certain way, you found yourself agreeing to whatever he proposed. Such was the case now. “Gods help us. Fine. Do not make me regret this.”

Kouji’s smile widened but he bowed in thanks.

“I will alert the elite corps. You should probably find Shibuya, as your cousin was supposed to meet him nearly an hour ago. Check my tent, he’s probably there…sulking or somesuch.”

“Yes sir.” He glanced over at his cousin. “Behave, Karin. Don’t go poking around in my things.”

“Hah. It’s not like you have anything interesting, anyway…”

Kouji strode out of the tent and Takehiro ducked, acting on an undeveloped hunch. There would be time to chase after Kouji in a minute, but now that darkness had fallen, he could possibly get a better look into the tent and discover Red’s lost form… He shifted to the left and peeked through
another tear in the tent, wondering at the shoddy material as he did so. Now he could see both Hideyoshi and the right half of Red, who was sitting on a chair and looked absolutely no different at all.

Takehiro sighed. He’d been hoping for something embarrassing.

“Thank you, Field Marshal.”

Now that there was no one else in the room, Hideyoshi directed his full attention to the girl. “I-what for?”

Takehiro saw Red’s smile, half cut off by the tent and the dim lighting in the tent. “For listening to my idea. And...well. For other things too: like taking me in and letting me fight, even when it’s clear you don’t want me to. Or for always treating me with respect even though you don’t want me here in the first place. And even for making me scout with Shibuya, even though he teases me all the time…”

_How rude. I do not tease her all the time. 60%, tops._

“And I suppose it’s cowardly of me to do this when I can’t see your expression, but thanks to you, my time here has been...better than I could have dreamed. You’ve given me a new purpose, Field Marshal. So...I am yours to command as long as I draw breath.” She stood, stepping out of the shadow that had obscured her face, and he understood her comment about not seeing Hideyoshi’s expression. Her eyes were open but were obscured by a milky white film - in her lost form, she was not only powerless, but blind.

She bowed slowly, holding the position as if to infuse it with a sense of her gratitude. Yet Takehiro’s attention was caught by Hideyoshi’s left hand, which had clenched into a fist. The field marshal had turned his face away from him so he couldn’t see his expression but he was surprisingly hesitant when he responded. “There is...no need for thanks, Shihoin. I am only doing my duty.”

“I am still grateful.” She rose and reached for the chair, moving jerkily. “But I’m taking up your time. I’ll be here if anything changes.”

It took both men a moment to realize she had dismissed him. The field marshal apparently did not take the hint. “Would you not be more comfortable in your own tent?”

“And let Shibuya find me? Hardly. He’s probably angry by now because I didn’t tell him I lost my power. _Probably dumped water all over everything,_” she muttered in an aside. “_Hope Kouji beats him tomorrow..._”

That prompted him to move. He had spent too much time here, and Kouji doubling back and discovering him eavesdropping was the last thing he needed. So, thinking of devious ways to punish Red, Takehiro backed away from the tent and then took off towards Fujiwara’s headquarters. It was a better way to keep his mind occupied then wondering about the uncomfortable yet charged interaction between the only two power users he could honestly call friends.
Although the army had been lying in wait for more than 24 hours, when the dragon finally came it took them all by surprise. Dawn was a few hours off and Takehiro had just woken to take his shift when the ground beneath him rumbled, the leaves on the trees quivering. He froze, considering the chances that the disruption was anything other than the dragon.

An earthquake right at this moment was unlikely. He shook Kouji awake, ignoring the man’s scowl. There was no need to explain, however, as the ground shook immediately. Kouji sat up, dark eyes scanning the forest. “How long—”

“Just now. This one was more severe.”

They spread out so they would not provide a single target. Both waited, muscles tense and senses on alert. Yet the forest was silent around them, and there was no signal flare from the main body of the army or from the elite corps. They held their position for more than ten minutes, waiting for another tremor or sign of the dragon. Takehiro relaxed by degrees, eventually daring to whisper, “Do you think they’ve—”

His question was lost when the ground beneath them exploded, and the forest erupted into a cacophony of displaced animals, uprooted trees, and the dragon’s roar. Takehiro was thrown off his feet, flying backwards into a tree twenty yards away. As he hurtled through the air there was enough time to piece together the dragon’s cry and dark shadow at its feet. It travels underground, he thought, before reaching out to grab a branch that whipped by. Yet it snapped, and there was nothing else to keep him from slamming into a tree trunk and blacking out.

He had been an utter fool, Kouji decided, as he ducked behind a tree moments before the dragon’s tail landed at precisely the spot he had been. He had focused only on the wind in the trees, and not on the ground. That was why he had been taken unawares, and it was due to this that Shibuya had no warning before being thrown out of the blast zone. Judging by Shibuya’s silence, he would have to assume he was unconscious...or worse. Karin would be disappointed; yet this was not the time to care. Now, it was all up to him.

Kouji propelled himself from tree to tree, avoiding the claws and spiked tail of what would undoubtedly be the most difficult opponent he had yet faced. From quick glances he estimated the dragon to be 20 feet long and 12 feet high, covered in overlapping ridges of skin that had been hardened to the point of armor. Later, he would describe it as a dinosaur, save for the oblong shape of the jaw and the ability to burrow through the earth like a mole. For now, he had his hands full merely dodging the creature, let alone forming an accurate mental image.

The creature screamed, cutting through the silence of the early morning. The sound bloomed inside of him, sparking awake every nerve in his body. Unconsciously, his lips curved into a wild grin. This was what he wanted, what he had been born for! Who needed anything other than air to
breathe when there was such a creature to battle? He flicked his wrist and called upon the wind to harden at the beast’s neck, hoping to startle it long enough to get a few hits in. When the dragon reared back, Kouji unsheathed his katana and propelled himself upward, seemingly riding the current of the air in order to slash at the creature’s unprotected eyes.

His aim was good, yet the dragon turned away at the last moment so that his blade landed on the snout, instead. There was barely enough time to create a small aerial wall at his side so that the jagged teeth bearing down on him did not rend him in half - the damage was still serious, and Kouji jumping to the trees in an effort to regroup. He pressed his hand against the wound, mind racing as the dragon flailed in search of him. The dragon’s bite was perilous - the vacuum that could stop bullets and blades had been shattered underneath the force and keeness of its teeth. It was luck that none of the wounds were deep, although he would have an impressive array of scars after this.

Without Shibuya, his options were limited. The creature was too heavy for the winds to buffet, and the hardening could only be done in small areas. He didn’t trust his blade to cut through the creature’s scales, yet without a clear shot at the eyes, how else could he incapacitate the creature? Whatever he did he had to do it quickly, though. The dragon was quickly recovering from the damage Kouji had dealt and was heading in the direction Shibuya had been thrown.

He sheathed his blade and leaped after the dragon, landing unsteadily on its back. Gripping onto an upraised patch of skin, he withdrew his dagger and attempted to force it down into the dragon’s flesh. As he suspected the skin was too thick, and the blade skidded to the left, barely piercing through. The dragon had felt it, however, and Kouji had to dive forward to avoid being bludgeoned by its tail.

Although he was now on the dragon’s stubby neck the flesh was no more forgiving, and when he tried once again to stab down again he was met with no success. Yet this time he was out of the tail’s range, so the dragon shook itself violently and Kouji, not expecting such a maneuver, was thrown to the ground. He would have been trampled underfoot had he not kicked off a branch of a nearby tree, using the wind to direct himself beyond the creature’s reach. As it was he had to roll to the side immediately upon landing, barely avoiding the dragon’s deadly bite.

The adrenaline was still running its mad course through his veins, and in spite of the terrible odds and the danger he was in, Kouji had never felt so alive. He laughed exultantly, and had time for one last thought before throwing himself back into the fray: *let me die this death 1000 times to live all this again!*

Kouji dashed in front of the creature to attempt a variant on an earlier attack. He threw his hands together in a parody of a clap and summoned the wind from the east and the west to converge at the center, the dragon’s injured snout. It was somewhat successful - the monster was confused, twisting its head to and fro, snapping at its invisible enemy. To land a clear shot he would need to find a way to force its head still, even if just for a moment. Yet he already knew how - the question was whether he could hold an aerial wall around the dragon’s head while sparing enough force to deliver the killing blow. Kouji grinned. There was only one way to find out.

Kouji clenched his hands into fists, and the winds that pressed against the dragon now solidified. Yet the creature was incredibly strong, and the force of holding the wall around the mouth was almost more than he could do. Sweat broke out on his brow as his both arms began to shake, yet the small patches of free air continued to harden at his command. The dragon did not go quietly, however. While it was unable to move its head, it swung wildly with its tail, hoping to hit its prey. Yet it would not land too close to its head for fear of injuring itself, and that was Kouji’s salvation.

Still, the force of holding the aerial wall, coupled with the injury Kouji sustained earlier was too
much. He choked as blood bubbled up from the back of his throat. His hands spasmed, and the smallest finger on his left hand popped out of its socket. It was in that moment that his strength gave out and aerial wall dissolved. The dragon reared back and roared, victorious. Temporarily immobilized at the expense of so much effort, Kouji watched as the dragon turned its gaze on him—only to see the silhouette that flew across the sun, shaped like a man with a katana upraised. He landed just as the dragon lowered its maw, simultaneously thrusting his blade through the dragon’s eye. The dragon screamed a final time, and the volume and fury in it caused the forest to vibrate in sympathy. Shibuya vaulted backwards, landing in a crouch at Kouji’s side. Apart from the blood that trickled down the side of his neck, he looked to be in better shape than Kouji. Yet there was a wild, unfocused glint in his eye, and he had trouble speaking. “C’mon, Kou- Gotta’...back. Now.”

Above them the dragon keened and staggered. Kouji found the strength to move as the two men jumped backwards, barely avoiding the collision as the dragon fell to the ground. It twitched as it lay there and black blood flowed from the wound, collecting on the dirt in an obsidian pool. The dragon’s other eye, wide, golden, and reflecting a disconcerting intelligence stared back at them. The two men waited tensely; at the edge of their nerves until the light in its eye went out. Finally with one final spasm the dragon collapsed, dead.

Kouji hunched over, breathing heavily and spitting out little mouthfuls of blood. The adrenaline slowly faded, but euphoria took its place. They had survived. Not only that, but they had faced the most dangerous beast alive and won. He glanced over at his companion, and the joy lessened. Shibuya mirrored his pose, but it was not blood he was spitting up - he vomited and could barely keep his balance while doing so. Kouji had seen others suffering from concussions before, and recognized the signs.

He waited for the retching to stop before he extended his arm to his partner. “Let’s go, Shibuya. We have to get back to camp.”

The younger man did not reply, nor did he accept Kouji’s help. He straightened, wobbling before throwing his arms wide for balance. “Lead...the way.”

Kouji frowned as he caught hold of the man before he fell over. He outright scowled when Shibuya attempted to pull away. “God’s teeth, Shibuya- what’s wrong with you? You may be concussed but I’m here to help you!” Shibuya said nothing, and tried harder to pull away from Kouji’s grip. It was the avoidance of his touch that finally made Kouji realize what his friend feared.

“If you’re afraid of me discovering that you’re a rare kind, you are too late, comrades. I’ve known that for some time, now. So calm down and let’s get back to camp- you need to see the doctor about your head.”

Shibuya stared at him with wide, barely focused eyes. “You...you knew? How...how did you know?”

Kouji dipped down so that he could pull Shibuya’s arm over his shoulders, forcefully beginning their trek back to the camp. “It wasn’t that difficult to figure out, friend. Especially when we spar as often as we do. But what clinched it was watching you and Karin practice her other ability. I figured you had to be something truly special for her to go half as hard as she did on you.” Kouji chuckled. “Would that she’d go that hard on me.”

Shibuya was having a hard time processing the information, although Kouji couldn’t blame him. Rare kinds were the stuff of legends, yet something the king took very seriously. Adding this to his concussion, and it was no wonder his mind was boggled. “So she...she didn’t tell? You saw us?”
“No, she didn’t tell me. I simply followed the two of you, wearing the restrictor her father gave me before he died. And no, no one else saw. I made sure of that.”

“And you won’t tell?” Shibuya’s speech was firmer now, and the glazed look in his eye was fading.

“Not if you keep Karin’s secret.”

Shibuya smirked. Although it was half-hearted, it was another sign that his mind was clearing. “Well, I can’t betray my best sparring partner. Oh, almost forgot—” he leaned over and tugged at his belt, freeing his sheathed weapon with a little trouble. “Speaking of secrets; take this. We may have to switch for now. Just until the hubbub dies down.”

Kouji looked down at the offered weapon. Looking at it made him remember his moment of weakness, and how Shibuya had ultimately been the one to slay the dragon. While he didn’t begrudge his friend the kill, it was an unpleasant memory that bordered on failure. “I don’t understand.”

“Sure you do. You have to be the one holding the weapon that has the dragon’s blood on it. Oh, and eyeball goop. Because, of course, you were the one stuck it in there.”

“Shibuya-”

“Yes, it was the great Shihoin Kouji who slew the dragon, saving the king’s army and my pretty, unconscious hide. I wish I had been awake to see it. And, ladies- I hear he’s single!”

Kouji was unsure whether Shibuya’s return to flippancy was more a blessing or an annoyance. On one hand, it seemed as though the man hadn’t suffered too much brain damage. On the other, it reminded him that the man acted as if he were brain damaged all the time. “I’m not taking credit for what you did. It’s not just, and-”

Shibuya pursed his lips, frowning disapprovingly at Kouji. “You’re not thinking this through. If I had killed the dragon, I’d become a celebrity. Everyone would want to know how I did it, where I’m from, who I am…do you catch my drift? That’s why you slew the dragon. Heroically. Handsomely. Single-handedly.” He shrugged. “Such a difficult life you lead.”

“I… I understand.” And he did. He didn’t like it, but Shibuya had saved his life, and such action deserved loyalty in return. If it would keep his secret, he would hold his peace.

The two men made their way to the camp in silence, helping each other over debris and fallen trees. It was only when the camp was in sight that Kouji spoke. “I owe you one.”

Shibuya smirked, hearing the unspoken thank you. “More than one, I think. You’re going to have to introduce me to some pretty girls sometime.”

“Don’t push your luck, Takehiro.”

“Ahh, so we’re at first name terms already? Well I suppose we did just slay a dragon together…” The men bantered until they reached the camp, arguing over inconsequentialities and setting their stories straight for the inevitable interview with Fujiwara. And although neither of them said it, they both enjoyed the last moment of calm before they became heroes.

...
In the Fujiwara estate on the other end of the Plains of High Heaven, a young man bowed low before the younger son of the great family. His incongruously colored hair was hidden by a military cap, and deference defined his stance. Although the official proclamation would come from the king, his benefactor had called him here today to congratulate him - for Heike Masaomi was to be rewarded for his service and skills, honed throughout his teenage years. It was the proudest moment of the young man’s life, and he shared it with the man who had brought him up from nothing: an orphaned gutterboy to the second in command of the king’s personal protection corps.

“I am proud of you, my boy.” Fujiwara Souri spoke in slow, measured tones, beaming with a pride that bordered on paternal. The sight of it warmed Heike’s heart.

“Thank you, sir. That was my aim.”

“You have never failed me, Heike. And now you reap the rewards. Yet are you prepared to serve me even in the future? No matter how odd the request may seem?”

Heike was young, and flush with confidence and gratitude. How could he do anything other than trust the man who had given him everything? “Yes, sir. For you, I will do anything.”

The man who would someday become Prime Minister of all Japan smiled. “Then do not fail me, Heike. That is my only request.”

And gods forgive him, even if it cost him his last breath, Heike would not.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dunnnnnnnnnn and the Prime Minister finally enters the scene. Evil times will soon abound!

Next chapter teaser: In present time, the Code:Breakers undergo training of dreams and blood, and after six years apart Sakura has learned to misunderstand Ogami.
Blood Dreams

Chapter Summary

In which the Code:Breakers entertain dreams of their own, and misunderstandings abound

Chapter Notes

Recycled idea from a unfinished fic on fanfiction "Lost Dreams."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2018

There was no story the next day. After hearing Shibuya’s fragmented tale, scattered throughout with remembrances from Kouji; his wife, and his erstwhile student, it was decided that the Code:breakers had enough to think about and thus would begin their training. Their initial exercise was nothing like they had expected, however.

Toki, who had taken the first dream appearance of his father about as well as anyone had expected, rubbed his temples. “So...you’re telling us to go to sleep.”

Shibuya nodded, his saintly expression fooling no one. “Yep!”

“Because we’ll train in our dreams.”

The unnerving expression held. “Yep!”

“...After three days of watching your dreams?”

“Well if you don’t want to gain exponential strength and endurance simply by taking a nap, I suppose I could take you on myself. In our nyanmaru suits, of course.”

“Ohhhhhhh no, you shitty old cat. There is no fuckin’ way I’m getting in one of those suits ever again-”

Ogami had been surprisingly willing to take on the unorthodox challenge. Although ‘unorthodox’ was perhaps the wrong word, as Ogami had been subjected to several other similar tests in the past, usually at the hands of Code:Emperor. Yet Sakura was sure he wouldn’t have objected had that not been the case. If he was unconscious, he couldn’t be forced into her presence, and he had only spent every moment between now and their last interview pointedly ignoring her.

The exercise was simple: while they slept they would encounter a temptation, and all they had to do was deny it and wake up. It was as easy as opening a door in their minds, Maka had claimed. She would lead them to it, and in essence push them through, yet once she shut the door after them
she would be unable to open it. It all hinged on their ability to get out on their own power.

Karin had noticed the unspoken worry in Sakura’s eyes, and she had reassured the girl. *Don’t worry. The test itself isn’t the true challenge - it will be laughably easy for all of them.* She held aloft a small vial, nearly identical to the rare kind serum. *What we’re really doing is injecting them with some of my blood. It will give them some protection from Asura, when she wakes. Because I bound her, she can’t kill me outright without also killing herself...so sensing some of my blood within them should make her cautious, at the least. It will all be fine, Sakura. Your friends will all be up in a few hours, and then their physical training may begin.*

The test had to last for at least 30 minutes, so that Karin could ensure that her blood took, and circulated throughout the body. How she managed to keep her blood distinct even within the body of another was apparently one of the skills she had honed throughout the last century.

Sakura watched as one by one her friends drifted off to sleep, aided by an herbal concoction her father had prepared. They had set up sleeping bags in the basement training room, to ensure their safety and so they could be monitored. Karin claimed she would know when the blood had ‘taken’ and then Maka, who would hold the mental door shut, would lessen her hold on it, allowing the young ones to break free. Yuuki was the first to succumb to slumber, Toki the last, and after that all there was to do was to wait.

Karin sat with her arm around Maka, supporting the woman who sat slumped against her. The dream maker was pale, and sweat beaded at her temples. Sakura finally realized what a strain the last few days must have been on the woman - using her power continuously, without break for hours at a time. At least she would have some time to rest after the dream training, but she looked quite ill already…

She made to walk over to them, intending to ask Karin if there was anything she could do. Yet her father’s conversation with Kouji caught her attention, and the mention of her mother stopped her in her tracks.

“They’ve been tracking the signs for weeks, yet found nothing definite. Sakurako says Zed is growing more unstable day by day - it’s like they’re children again. If they’re separated for more than a few hours, he starts reverting to his lost form.”

Kouji’s fingers toyed with the scar that emphasized his eye. “Then it’s as we suspected. Someone has to be controlling all this, otherwise the demons would be free to wreak havoc. As soon as Heike and Yukihina send word from the States, we can-” He cut off, noticing how Sakura had gravitated over to them, engrossed in the conversation. “Hello, little cousin.”

“Hello. May I please join this conversation? It seems to concern my mother. Also you mentioned demons, and those concern me.”

Shibuya took one look at his daughter’s determination and knew she wouldn’t be fobbed off so easily. Although they hadn’t planned on saying anything until they were sure, he supposed telling her a little couldn’t hurt. “It’s nothing to worry about yet, Sakura. Sakurako and Zed are simply checking into the possibility of demons. Nothing is certain.”

Sakura looked for guarded worry in her father’s expression, but could find none. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

Kouji snorted, suppressing his full-bodied laughter. “Dangerous? Please. This is the Amazon and her Hero we’re talking about. I’d fear more for the demons!”
While Sakura did not catch Kouji’s slip of the tongue, Shibuya did, and he shot him a look. Yet Sakura’s next question cut off any further exchange. “And Heike and Yukihina? What exactly are they doing in the United States? Are they looking for demons too?”

Kouji’s smirk was irreverent and took up most of his face. “If by ‘searching for demons’ you mean playing ‘hide the salami’ then—”

“Kouji!”

“Well it’s not like I’m wrong.”

Both the innuendo and her father’s consternation went right over Sakura’s head. “Hmmm. I had no idea salami was so popular over in the States, nor that people hid it...”

Shibuya stumbled over himself in his attempt to salvage the situation. “Do- don’t mind Kouji, he’s just cranky because Prince won’t look at him. Heike and Yukihina are simply investigating some of the Prime Minister’s property. Salami has nothing to do with this.”

Kouji glowered, the jab about Rui’s avoidance hitting hard. “Salami’s got nothing to do with you, either, you old bastard. And Rui is not avoiding me. I’ll prove it when she wakes up.”

The two argued just as they did a century ago, and something about it made Sakura’s heart unclench in her chest. Perhaps it was that even throughout all the painful events within the span of her own lifetime, and the further years of separation and secrets, they were still good friends. The thought that their regard for each other survived the war with Eden made her hopeful for her own future. If only Ogami could share a bit of her optimism...

...  

Yuuki was both the first to sleep and the first to wake, although Rui was close on his heels. Karin had finished secreting her blood in their veins barely five minutes before Yuuki broke through his mental door, wide awake and hungry. He took his time in waking, stretching and ruffling his hair, obviously unperturbed by whatever his test had been. When finished he made his way over to Sakura, settling his chin in the curve of her shoulder and ignoring the glares her father directed at him. “Good morning everyone.” He yawned widely, not bothering to cover his mouth. “That was a strange dream. Am I stronger now?”

Rui, on the other hand, reacted quite differently. She had woken up only five minutes later, just as the Karin had finished Yuuki’s checkup. Unlike Yuuki, there was no casual disinterest in her test, no stretching and yawning and blinking away the sleep from her eyes. Waking with a sudden, violent inhale, Rui took one panicked look over at the cluster of spectators, met Kouji’s concerned glance and sprinted out of the room.

The stunned silence lasted until they heard the echo of the door slammed shut, wherein Shibuya shot a smug look over at his friend. “Who isn’t avoiding you?”

“Shut up, Takehiro.”

“I’m just saying—”

“Shut up, Takehiro.”

Karin stood, gently disengaging herself from Maka. “Oh for the love of- will you two give it a
rest? Kouji, stay down here and watch the boys. Come get me when Ogami wakes. Takehiro, you come with me. I need to check Rui’s blood and you’re the only person with the keys to the mansion.”

“Only Ogami? What if Toki wakes up?” Sakura’s head tilted to the right, hoping the heat on her cheeks wasn’t a blush. She had tacked on concern for Toki at the very end, but she feared her fixation on Ogami was obvious. Reflecting on it further, it probably had been for a very long time. Damnit.

“Toki’s test is a little different. Maka will know when he’s done.” She smiled, and tugging Shibuya after her like a recalcitrant child, made her way up the stairs.

That had been over an hour ago. Since then, her father had come down only to tell them they would have take out for dinner, as Rui was in no condition to cook. He didn’t explain whether it was a physical or a psychological malady, although he did say everything was under control. His assurances did nothing for Kouji, however, who was forced to watch over the two remaining sleepers with a troubled, introspective gaze. Sakura stayed down with him, entertaining her own dark thoughts. Why hadn’t Ogami woken yet? Out of all of them he had the most experience with this sort of test. And he had always surpassed it easily! What could possibly be holding him back now?

Her fears only deepened when Toki was the next to wake. He too had an unexpected reaction. He awoke suddenly, pushing himself into a crouch before realizing where he was. Once up, he cast his gaze around wildly. “Where is she?! I-” He cut off, seeing the amazement on their faces and Maka, sitting propped against the wall behind them.

Toki made his way over and bent low so that he was face to face with his aunt. For a long moment they merely watched each other, identically shaped eyes reflecting different colors. Finally, she nodded. Murmuring something too low for Sakura’s ears to catch, he turned and walked up the stairs, not even sparing a glance for his slumbering best friend.

Kouji turned to the dream maker, raising an eyebrow inquisitively. “What was that about?” He glanced towards the stairs and there was a hint of displeasure in his gaze. “And what’s he off to do?”

Maka shrugged, then straightened her legs so that they splayed out in front of her. “I had a story of my own to tell him. It was something to think about when hatred for his father fuels his blood, and he despises our name. It was also something that Karin didn’t want told. He’s probably gone to bother her about it. Stupid boy.” She leaned her head back against the wall, shutting her eyes. “Wake me when the last one finishes. Such an annoyance; how long does he plan to take?”

That had been several hours ago. Her father had brought dinner down for the three watchers; finally taking pity on his friend and taking his place in the basement. The speed with which Kouji made his way up the stairs wasn’t surprising, especially when Shibuya told him Rui had locked herself in her bedroom and that she was currently making a long distance call to Yukihina. After Kouji left he took his place beside his daughter, and in hushed tones talked to her of this and that; attempts at conversation that would turn her attention from the unconscious form of the man she loved.

A while later Karin came down, flushed and fidgeting. She shook Maka awake, inviting her to sleep comfortably in her own bed, assuring her that she would take it from there. At that, Maka left them, muttering about young men and their endurance. No one wanted to know exactly what she was referring to.
Sakura broke the silence as the three of them watched Ogami. “Is it...supposed to take this long?”

Karin shrugged. “Who knows? It’s different for everyone. He’ll wake up when he’s ready.”

Shibuya did not quite agree. “I wonder too, Sakura. He’s already faced this sort of test from the Code:Emperor, after all.” He turned to his old friend. “And you really don’t know what they will see? Maka did say it was different for everyone…”

She hesitated, and it was enough to cement Sakura’s suspicion that the older woman knew more than she let on. “But you suspect something?”

Karin winced and looked beseechingly at Shibuya. “Are you sure she’s your daughter? You were never this blunt.” She sighed when father and daughter fixed her with identical annoyed expressions. “Ok, ok! I see it now! Gods in heaven the whole Shibuya line will be the end of me!”

“Karin.”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, all I know is that Maka told me the key component to escaping the test was that you have to want to escape. You have to choose to leave the temptation behind. It’s that simple. So, whatever he’s seeing in there...I guess it’s keeping him there.”

Sakura stiffened. The thought that Ogami had something he wanted so badly that it impeded with his training caused a tight ball of nerves to settle in her stomach. The thought that it couldn’t possibly be her made her body tremble with rage. After all, he had given her up again and again, when their love was at its nadir, without even breaking a sweat. Yet now after six years apart he had something so important that he didn’t want to let go of it? It was unfair. It was unjust. It was-

"Unacceptable.” Sakura’s harsh whisper drove her father from his own complicated remembrances and half-formed plans of consoling his daughter. He had assumed she would be suffering from the same mixture of sorrow and resignation that she had worn all this week, yet she was, as ever, an enigma to him. Currently, she was vibrating with rage, apparently having taken offence with Ogami’s obvious - at least to him - refusal to let his love for her go.

Women, he thought. I will never understand them.

Sakura noticed none of her father’s surprise, nor Karin’s wary glances. Her universe had narrowed its focus until all that remained was Ogami and his weakness. She had never experienced such rage before, fueled as it was by her own pain and loneliness. Had he moved on? Had he found something...or someone more worthy of him than herself? Had their encounter in the hallway been only a way of appeasing her? It couldn’t be her he was thinking of; he had pushed her away in the real world often enough! Her thoughts whirled in a destructive circle, and she unconsciously clenched her fists and jaw. He could not be this weak. If he could turn her down, he had better be prepared to overcome everything else in the entirety of existence, because otherwise even his feelings were weak, and nothing about him should be weak-

Dimly aware that she was making no sense even to herself, Sakura brought her palms sharply against her cheeks. The action made the adults jump, yet it didn’t clear her mind. Instead, it gave her an idea. Sakura charged forward, so suddenly that her father didn’t have a chance to stop her. She raced over to Ogami’s prone form, hesitating just a moment to take in the sight of his sleeping face. Like this, he looked so peaceful, as if he were just any other young man…

Sakura scowled. They had been there and done that, and he had managed to overcome it. So why wasn’t he denying it now? Mind made up, Sakura bent down, and then threw a leg over Ogami’s waist so that she was effectively straddling him. Behind her she heard a noise like a balloon
deflating, but she paid it no mind.

"Takehiro, was that you?!

"My - my baby! She’s going to commit indecent acts right in front of her father!"

"Yes, a bold move. I see that she does indeed take after you."

Sakura looked down at the man she loved, and a small part of her anger receded. They needed him alive to fight this dragon, after all. So, she martialed only half of her strength before she made her move.

Smack! Her hand lit across his face, and it reddened where she struck. Behind her, Shibuya and Karin watched on with identical open-mouthed faces of astonishment. When Ogami didn’t react, she began the verbal onslaught. “You stupid, conceited, selfish power user! You go on and on about your strength and whatnot but you can’t even defeat this? What are you waiting for, Ogami? If you’re the hero, you have to be the one to wake and save us!”

"Such a violent wake up call...I guess she is Sakurako’s daughter!"

"Not now, Karin."

He lay still beneath her, and her rage spilled past her eyelids, manifesting in hot tears that slid down her cheeks. So now even her words were not enough? Had the past six years undone all her past importance? “But maybe I was wrong - maybe we all were wrong. Maybe you aren’t supposed to be the hero this time. Maybe it’s supposed to be Prince, or Yuuki, or Toki...if that’s the case, then I shouldn’t be down here bothering with you. I should be with them, supporting them - the one who are still fighting.” She was crying harder now, and her anger was no longer distinguishable from her heartache. One tear slipped from the bridge of her nose to Ogami’s cheekbone, sliding down to his ear.

His left eye twitched, but with her blurred vision she was unable to tell.

She brought her voice down to a whisper, leaning forward as if the urgency of her plea was too private for others to hear. “I believe in you, Ogami. Even now. Please don’t prove me wrong. I’m mad and sad and a lot of things right now but if you just wake up then I’ll forgive you, ok?”

His head shifted slightly, but she wiped her tears at just that moment and so missed the movement.

“If...if you wake up now, I promise that I’ll-"

His voice was soft and raspy and interrupted whatever she was about to promise. “…’kura?”

“Ogami?!” Sakura sputtered, blushing and nearly choking on her shocked inhale.

He smiled sleepily, still distracted by the dregs of his dream. “Good morning, swee-”

“You!” She would have slapped him again, but he caught her arm. His reflexes were still impeccable, even at the threshold of sleeping and waking. “What do you think you’re doing? Do you know how much I worried about you? What was so...so damn wonderful that you...you...” She rallied, gripping onto her anger as tightly as she could to keep from surrendering to her melancholy. “Why didn’t you wake up?!!”

“Sakura.” Shibuya finally interrupted his daughter by pulling her up and off his student. He took one look at her wet cheeks and pulled her into a hug, shooting Ogami a look that promised
punishment by fire and dismemberment. “Good morning, Ogami. I would say it’s in your best interests to wake up quickly, as I will be coming after you the moment Sakura stops crying.”

“Hold on, I still have to check him.” Karin crouched down, spreading her fingers and closing her eyes. Without touching the skin, she ran her hand from his temples to his toes, fingers twitching occasionally. Once finished, she nodded. “He’s good.”

The haze in Ogami’s eyes finally cleared. “That was a dream?” His noh mask expression settled over his face, hiding however the knowledge made him feel. “How long was I out?”

“About six hours. We’ve all been waiting for you, Ogami-san.” Karin spoke lightly, but the tension in the room twisted her words into an accusation. His eyes clouded, yet she couldn’t tell whether it was with shame or regret. She backpedaled, hoping to smooth things over. “Not that there’s anything wrong with taking your time!”

Ogami raised himself to a seated position, very obviously not looking towards the rare kinds. “Six hours? I see. Has everyone else started training?”

Karin glanced nervously at Shibuya, whose face was etched in stone and anger. “Not exactly. Yuuki’s been training with Kouji for the last few hours, but we had a bit of an issue with Rui’s test, and she’s taking the rest of the day to...recover. Toki only started about an hour ago, due to his impertanance.”

Ogami didn’t even raise an eyebrow. Sakura steadfastly refused to turn around. Shibuya glowered. Karin fervently wished to be anywhere else, effective immediately. “They’re upstairs, if you’d like to join them...?”

“I’ll take care of that, Karin. Take Sakura upstairs to check on Prince.” Shibuya’s tone brooked no refusals, and it finally roused Sakura from her tears.

“Father-”

He smiled down at her, so gently it made Karin’s eyes widen. “Don’t worry, darling. It’s really just to train. Besides, I’m worried about Prince too, especially if she’s calling Yukihina…” The last time that happened I had to rebuild the eastern half of my mansion. Kouji better have her purring like a kitten up there. “Go on, everything will be fine.”

After a moment of searching his eyes for honesty, she nodded. Without looking back at Ogami, she made her way to the stairs, closely followed by Karin, who attempted to lift the mood with quiet stories of her father in his younger years. “Did he ever tell you about his cat? The Almighty Scourge? That’s what the neighbors named it, you know…”

Ogami scrambled to his feet as soon as the women were out of view. It had been a long time since he had feared Shibuya, but he had also never made Sakura cry right in front of him. He tensed, expecting swift distribution of justice...

...that never came. “To begin, I want 20 laps and 3 sets of the warm up rep - you know the one. Then, I think we should focus on swordplay. I know you haven’t been keeping up with it as of late, but it’s important to stick with the basics, of course. After that-”

Ogami blinked rapidly, incredulously. “You’re going to ignore what just happened? Even after I upset Sakurakouji-san?”

Shibuya thrust his palm towards Ogami’s belly, faster than his eye could see. It was only the years of intense training that allowed Ogami to deflect the attack. The two men stared at each other, one
waiting for the next blow, the other the counter. After a long moment passed it became obvious that Shibuya was done and that Ogami was prepared to take a hit to atone.

“She wept because she hasn’t accepted it yet. You have, and that’s why you know all you can do is dream of her. I don’t begrudge you that, Ogami. And she will learn not to, as well.”

“And that’s why she was upset? That doesn’t seem right, Shibuya.”

Shibuya shrugged, unwilling to exert himself wondering about women when there was training to be done. “When you understand everything that goes through a woman’s mind, then you can tell me. Maybe she was jealous? Or maybe she misunderstood entirely? Who knows, Ogami. Right now is not the time to care, however.” He reached back for the katana strapped to his back, and grinned wolfishly. “Change of plans - I’ll attack you, and you have to survive until you locate my spare katana. Ready, and...go.”

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Chapter End Notes

Yes yes Sakura’s mind is a bit of a mystery to us all. Work hard, Ogami. Excessive levels of patience shall figure in your future!

…”

Next chapter teaser: In which feelings are denied, several dresses are featured, and the shadow unit is formed.
The Ball

Chapter Summary

In which battles are exchanged for social maneuvers, and victories are hard to come by.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1898, 1 month later

Karin was dressed in a grey, fashionable, silk evening gown; lips and eyelashes unusually heavy from makeup, and standing in heels that made her a full inch taller. Her head still gave the occasional throb, a reminder of her celebratory drunken bender with Kouji and Shibuya last night. Her hands were held by her incorrigible aunts, forcing her to assume pleasantries with those who came to gawk - whether politely or otherwise - at the only western power user in the room.

She had never known a more uncomfortable evening.

“You must be so proud of your cousin, Lady Shihoin! Bringing down a dragon all by himself! Oh, what heroic fortitude!” The lady pressed a delicate hand to her forehead in an imitation of an appreciative swoon. Karin’s lips twisted, partially in knowledge of the dragon slayer’s true identity, yet also to hide her dislike of the simpering lady in front of her. This Lady...Whomever was the third this evening to make a play for Kouji’s affections through his cousin. Thankfully, her aunts - and the one at her left was Kouji’s mother - didn’t have any patience for simpletons. She glanced to the scowls on either side of her (albeit five inches below) and had to bite her lip to keep from grinning. They may be forcing her to play nicely, but at least her aunts scared off the half the encounters...

As Kouji’s mother took control of the conversation with his admirer, Karin allowed her eyes to wander the ballroom. It was given in the army’s honor - Fujiwara and Kouji’s honor - and was well underway; dinner was followed by socializing, and only a few minutes ago, dancing. Many power users and their wives were unused to dancing in the western style, yet a stringed octet took up residence in the corner, performing waltzes and other popular tunes that many dancers only had a vague awareness of. For all this, the evening was going smoothly, and most looked to be enjoying themselves. An aura of optimism blanketed the room: before, the dragons had been thought to be invincible. Now that one had been brought down, there was hope.

Karin looked to the dais at the back of the room, where the king and her sister sat, holding hands and smiling graciously. Kouji sat with them, at the king’s side - the hero of the evening. Other members of the elite corps sat with them, but none as favored as her cousin. Her eyes met with those belonging to a tall, white-haired man a little younger than herself, but they didn’t hold. She didn’t need any of those encounters, after all.

Yet even as she thought that, her eyes turned of their own volition to the field marshal, the only man honored that had chosen to sit with his family. His wife stood quietly at his side, tiny and beautiful, even when she was so heavily with child. Lady Hanako bowed and smiled, and Karin felt her chest throb in time with her head. She had always known Fujiwara was married with children,
but to see his wife personally, so lovely and perfectly Japanese was like a knife to the chest. Yet she forced herself to watch carefully, to get accustomed to the pain and disappointment. After all, it was the perfect opportunity to get over her foolish, one-sided, ill-advised affections for Fujiwara Hideyoshi.

She schooled her expression carefully, not allowing any of her thoughts to appear on her face. It had been less than a year since she had arrived in Japan, and it was still a mystery to her how she could have possibly developed any sort of inappropriate feelings for the field marshal. Well, as much a mystery as such a thing could be - when she allowed herself she could think of plenty of reasons. To start with, he had always shown her respect, even after her encounter with his men when she was fresh off the boat. And then again, when he had given her courage during her first interview with the king...when he had trusted her on missions with Takehiro...and when he proved himself to be the most loyal, steady, intelligent man she had ever met, through the hundred interactions spanning the months she had served him. Not to mention the image of him rumpled and half-dressed on that fateful night when Takehiro had first ‘gone small’...

Karin breathed deeply, hoping to rid her face of the flush that crept along it. *That* was inappropriate - a little, hero-worship crush she could accept, but to covet outright? It wasn’t something she would allow herself, not even in her dreams. She brought her attention back to her aunt Kimiko - Kouji’s mother - just in time to miss Fujiwara’s own guarded glance in her direction.

“Now, dear. We’ll just have to ignore the rest of the well-wishers, because we all know what they’re after and I’m having none of *that* so help me gods. It is time to talk of more interesting things.” She grinned and it was obvious where Kouji had inherited his own fearsome smile. “Like the army. Does Lord Fujiwara really let you fight? How many missions have you been on? Have you killed many demons?”

Before she could begin to respond, quiet Aunt Kaede cut in with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. “And what’s it like surrounded by all those men?” She tutted at Karin’s shocked expression. “Oh, you’re just like your sister - absolutely no fun at all…”

Although the two ladies were not sisters by blood that was a fact most people tended to forget. Kaede, as a Shihoin born, was a natural hellion. The only surprise had been her willingness and subsequent happy marriage to Sakurakouji Yousu, a meek, mild-mannered power user on the outskirts of the noble circle. Kimiko, as a Shihoin bred, was the fearsome woman whose sharp tongue could invoke fear in the King of All Heaven himself. Happily, both women had taken to Karin, something she was quite thankful for…even if it lead to awkward moments, like this one.

Karin foundered, but salvation came from an unexpected corner. “Good evening, ladies.” The voice was low and somewhat rough, and one that Karin knew well. She winced reflexively, wondering if there was any possibility of the field marshal’s being a mind reader, instead of a magnetism adept...or if he had overheard her irrepressible aunts.

“Ahh, Field Marshal Fujiwara! How good to see you...we were just speaking with our niece about serving under you!” That was from Kaede, and caused the tips of Karin’s ears to flush. “Why did her aunt go so far? Couldn’t she be proper? Karin suspected that her aunt took an absurd amount of glee in making her personally uncomfortable. Was it the western standard again? Or was she like this all the time? Karin felt for her daughter, Sakurako. How did the teenager handle it?

“Ahh, and before I forget, Yousuke *loved* your latest work: The Changing of the Seasons. He raved about it for months, and is convinced that your poetry will stand the tests of time, etc. etc, and that if he weren't at home fortifying our farmer's lands, he would beg to shake your hand. As it is, I think you get the picture.”
Karin glanced up at the field marshal to see how he would take the compliment. It had taken her nearly three weeks and two recitations of the poem her Aunt mentioned to believe Shibuya's claim that the battle-hardened field marshal was also a poet of no small renown. It had then taken her another week entirely to be able to think about the field marshal without blushing. Yet Fujiwara simply smiled and nodded, accepting the compliment graciously.

“And Lady Hanako - you’re looking well, especially at this period. How long until the babe is due, dear?” Kimiko’s smile no longer held any mischief. Unlike Kaede, she could be proper when she chose. Karin simply bowed and smiled at Fujiwara’s wife, who returned the gesture. She smiled gently at Kimiko. “Less than a month, according to the doctors. We’re hoping for another boy, this time. Two girls is plenty, don’t you think?” Hanako looked up at her husband as she took his arm, leaning into him for support.

They were the picture perfect couple. Karin swallowed, swamped by a sudden wave of self-revulsion. How could she have ever thought of the field marshal? She was so tall and strong and awkward; so utterly unfeminine. Even among her mother’s people she had been raised more as a boy than a girl! There was no way she would appeal to anyone Japanese. She, who hadn’t even appealed to westerners! The thought was ludicrous. Thinking only of ways to stop the tightness in her throat and the prickle against her eyelids, Karin tore her glance from Lady Hanako and accidently turned to Fujiwara. The chatter of her aunts blurred into the ambiance and the music, and when her eyes aligned with his she no longer felt anything save the urge to run.

Lord save me from myself.

Desperate to get away, she blurted out the only thing she could think of. “Field Marshal. Have you seen Shi-Takehiro?” Only at the last moment did she remember her friend’s request not to bring up his surname while they were in the palace. Still, the intimacy of using his first name stiffened her tongue. That, coupled with her bringing him up in the first place, turned suspicion against her. She saw it hedge across Fujiwara’s eyes, and fought back the urge to grimace. Whatever he thought, it would be better than him knowing the truth…

He hesitated, and Kaede pounced. “Ohhh, now who is Takehiro? Karin, you haven’t told us about any young men from the front…” She trailed off suggestively, and had they not been in polite company, would have waggled her eyebrows as well.

This time, Karin really did wince. “He’s just my friend, Aunt Kaede. He’s closer to Kouji, anyway.” She didn’t look at Fujiwara as she lied, but she didn’t need to. The disadvantage of being at eye level with him was that she could practically feel him narrow his eyes. He knew it was a lie as well. Could the evening get any worse?

Apparently so. “He’s in the antechamber with my men. If you desire to see him, would you pass along a message to him?” His eyes flickered, assessing her for any further sign of affection. Had she truly liked Shibuya, she would have felt it keenly. As it was, her own struggle to hide the feelings she bore for him kept her occupied.

“Of course, Field Marshal.” She slipped into a businesslike facade, hoping it would dispel any further suspicion.

“Inform him that his missing weapon has been found. Your cousin is currently holding it for him.”

There was no emphasis, no hesitation, nothing to prove that the field marshal had determined who had truly slain the dragon. Yet he knew, and it made Karin’s breath catch in her throat. She fought
to keep her gaze even, and simply nodded to affirm his message. “I’ll inform him right away, sir. He’ll be pleased to hear it.”

She bowed once more to the Lady Hanako, who watched her with cautious eyes, hard as chips of obsidian. Her aunts were much less circumspect, each intrigued with the mysterious Takehiro. Yet there would be time for their interrogation later. Now she was free. Turning and making her way out of the ballroom, her heart throbbed in time with her step. For once, she was in the mood for Shibuya’s teasing. Perhaps it would take her mind off impossible things.

Off in a different section of the palace, two teenagers snuck from their rooms. Zed frowned nervously as he glanced from side to side. “Are you sure this is a good idea, Rako? If we get caught, Kyo is gonna’ be so mad…”

Sakurako snorted at her friend’s timidity. “Don’t be such a baby, Zed. It’ll be fine! He wouldn’t get mad, anyway. Probably just think it was funny.” Both fell silent, reflecting on their benefactor’s bone-chilling laugh. She shook off her uneasiness and pulled at Zed’s hand. “C’mon. You’re the one who wants to see the ball! We’ll just hide with the servants and sneak a peak!”

“But won’t someone recognize you?”

She shrugged. “Please. Dad’s told me all about these things…the adults get drunk so quickly and then don’t remember a thing the next day. We’ll be fine. Besides we should try and say hi to Mom…” Sakurako made a face. “I think she misses you.”

“Your mother misses you too, Rako…”

Sakurako sighed and tugged harder, finally succeeding in pulling Zed along with her. They made their way through dark hallways, following the echoes of the party in the ballroom. There was only one close call, when two giggling servant girls veered perilously close to their impromptu hiding place behind a frowning, dignified statue of one of the king’s ancestors. Yet soon enough they were within two rooms of the party and it was then that Zed balked.

“Wait, wait-listen. Do you hear that?”

Sakurako rolled her eyes but stilled, training her ears on whatever Zed thought he heard. Nothing. “Zed, for the last time we will be fine. I won’t let anything happen to you-”

“Who are you?”

Sakurako spun to see wide, innocent eyes in the face of a young boy who was looking up at her, fascinated and trusting. At his side was another sprat about the same age who glared at her fiercely. Behind her, she heard Zed mutter something that sounded suspiciously like told you so. Sakurako ignored all of this, and pulled upon her dubious acting skills to save the day. “Hello, little boys! Are you here for the party? Ah, well, it’s getting late and young boys should be in bed, no? Well, off you go!”
“You’re not supposed to be here either, ugly-”

The facade of kindness was retracted immediately. “What was that, little brat? You feel like dying today?!”

“Rako, they’re just kids-”

“Don’t be rude to girls, Hitomi!”

Sakurako and Hitomi glared at each other, and for a moment sparks jumped from the boy’s shoulders. His kindly friend stamped them out with his palms. “No, no, no! We have to behave! Otherwise you’ll hurt the nice lady!”

No longer sparking, the boy glowered. “She’s not nice. And you’re too trusting, Soutarou. We have to keep away from these kinds of people!”

Knowing how ill-equipped Sakurako was at handling children, Zed stepped in. “It’s all right, Mr. Hitomi. We mean you no harm. As you guessed, we are not supposed to be here either...so telling on you would be telling on us, you see? So don’t worry.” He glanced over at his friend before leaning in and whispering confidentially. “And don’t mind her...she’s just a little high-strung.”

He straightened with a small yelp as Sakurako whacked him. “I heard that!”

Soutarou giggled, and stepped close to Zed. Before the teens could realize what he was doing, he folded his small fingers around Zed’s larger ones. “I like you, Mr. Zed. See how nice he is Hitomi?”

Zed inhaled raggedly, for a moment too stunned to shake free. Sakurako mirrored his shock, yet their moment of inaction brought forth a revelation. Soutarou was unharmed. He stood there smiling up at the older boy, showing no sign of letting go anytime soon. No one save Sakurako or Kyo had been able to touch Zed for any prolonged amount of time without feeling extreme discomfort, pain, and on three horrifying occasions - eventual death. That this boy was able to hold his hand so easily, feeling no side-effects could only mean one thing - the boy was powerful.

Sakurako’s heartbeat quickened, and a wide smile cut across her face, in contrast with Zed’s wide-eyed disbelief. “You like this big brother, huh? You’re something else, kid. Holding his hand doesn’t hurt?”

Soutarou looked at her quizically, and Hitomi moved close to his side. The little brat was still glaring. “No. Should it? His hand is quite cold though.” Soutarou looked up at Zed and it was with all the force and sweetness of a tiny, earthbound angel. “You should warm them up like this!” He rubbed his own small hands against Zed’s own, and Sakurako knew it was all over. Zed was such a softie, and he especially liked children. A small, pleased smile blossomed on his face, and that gentle expression he had previously only given her was directed at Soutarou. Sakurako ignored the momentary frisson of jealousy - Zed was her best friend, damnit, kid! and turned to his friend. “What about you, brat? Feel uncomfortable with him?”

Hitomi scowled, but made no move to come closer to Zed. After a moment of fierce internal debate, he lifted his head. “...he feels funny. Like my grandpa does...or my fox that died...” The boy trailed off, thinking hard. “But it’s not so bad. Like him better than you.”

“Feeling’s mutual, kid.”

Zed saw another squabble brewing and moved to stop it. “Now, now. We have to introduce ourselves properly. My name is Zed, and my friend’s name is Sakurako. We are both pleased to
make your acquaintance.”

Soutarou bowed politely, while Hitomi merely bobbed his head. Sakurako wondered why Zed was so much better at this than her and if there was any possible way, this late in the game, to switch places and let him be the nobleman.

When he rose, Soutarou looked up at her with those big eyes that seemed to look directly into her. “Sakurako? Like Sakurakouji Sakurako? Cousin to Shihoin Kouji?” His eyes sparkled. “The one who killed the dragon?”

Now, even Hitomi looked excited. This, Sakurako could understand, as her cousin killing a dragon was the most exciting thing she’d ever heard of. Between them, Zed chuckled. “You got it. I know they don’t look too much alike, but they’re cousins, all right.”

Soutarou’s mouth dropped in appreciation, but Hitomi was less impressed. “Then why are you sneaking around out here? Shouldn’t you be in there with all the fancy folk?”

Sakurako frowned at the lightning bug. She certainly wasn’t going to tell him she was barred from the party because she had failed every aspect of the Lady Training the queen had engineered for her. Not for the first time, Sakurako wished she had been born a boy. Then she could train all day, and not have to deal with all the fuss and nonsense of being a woman. “Who wants to go to parties, huh? Rather be out here with Zed. That way we can train.” It wasn’t a total lie, after all - Zed was the one who wanted to see what it was like. Although he would never admit it he had been excited for weeks; especially when he’d overheard several servants talking about how all the ladies had to come in western dress.

Therein lay the current source of Sakurako’s vexation: ever since they’d come to the palace he’d been blushing and stuttering over every girl who looked his way, and although Kyo had simply laughed and told her that was normal for guys his age, Sakurako didn’t get it. He’d certainly never acted like that for her. And what was so great about girls? Boys too, for that matter? Whenever Zed acted like this, it felt like there was a rift between them, and after all their years together and everything they’d gone through it was nothing less than betrayal. No wonder she had been snippy for weeks. Zed was growing up, and if he left her behind for some simpering girl, Sakurako was going to punch him in the face.

She was never, ever falling in love.

Realizing that nothing else was forthcoming, Zed took over. “It’s a good thing, right? If she’d attended, then we wouldn’t have met you two!” He squeezed Soutarou’s hand. “Now. It’s back to bed for both of you. Won’t you get into trouble if you’re caught wandering around after dark?”

Soutarou bit his lip and looked down at his feet. He shuffled them quietly. “Maybe. But we were so bored! And lonely! And Hitomi wanted to see the pretty ladies in their dresses…”

Hitomi blushed a bright red and immediately began to sputter. “N-no! I didn’t! No way! Stupid Soutarou! Don’t tell them things like that!”

“But you said:”

“I-I was just joking!”

Soutarou looked perplexed. “No, you weren’t…”

Sakurako narrowed her eyes. Even little boys chased after women? On second thought, perhaps all men were crazy, and societal restrictions aside it was far, far superior to be a woman.
“Well, if you don’t wish to sleep yet, perhaps you can come and train with us? We can just do a bit of light sparring. And we can teach you some katas with practice blades. Does that sound good?”

Both boys looked as if their birthdays had come early, and Soutarou threw his arms around Zed’s midsection. Even Hitomi looked as if he didn’t mind the aura of death that cloaked the older boy.

Soutarou bounced up and down a little without relinquishing his hold on Zed. “Really? Thank you so much Mr. Zed! And Ms. Sakurako too! Wow, this will be so much fun!” Zed’s look of bewildered pleasure made her smile. Well, she supposed it wouldn’t be a waste. Both boys were strong enough to withstand Zed, after all. They led the way to the sparring chamber, left empty in favor of the festivities. Yet as the boys raced excitedly to the center of the ring - Hitomi lighting up with little jets of electricity, and Soutarou shifting from one place to the other so quickly they couldn’t register the movements in between - she glanced over at Zed. “Are you sure it’s ok? I know you were excited about the ball…” She couldn’t bring herself to mention girls or their dresses, and for a moment she wished for the simple ease between the younger boys.

He smiled over at her and flicked her forehead gently with his middle finger. “Don’t give me that face, Riko. I’ve found something way better.” He nodded to the kids before turning his gentle eyes on her. “Besides, we promised. This will always be the most important thing.”

With a chuckle, he bounded over to the center of the ring, leaving Sakurako to heave an amused yet relieved sigh. Boys. She would just never understand them...
men (all wearing identical scowls directed at her, he belatedly noticed). “Stuff it, Shi-Takehiro.” She shivered. “I couldn’t take it any longer. Thankfully, the field marshal asked me to relay a message.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Hideyoshi did? You, to me? He encouraged us interacting at a public venue?” He hummed thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

His earlier suspicion on her flushed cheeks was proved when her blush deepened. “I...well, I think the field marshal believes…” Her eyes cast about wildly, yet her embarrassment did not lessen when she realized they were out of earshot. “He...about us…” She finally noticed Takehiro’s raised eyebrows and his teasing expression. “You are a terrible man. You know exactly what he thinks about us. I hate you.” She stuck out her tongue before continuing. “But that’s not why he sent me. He knows. About the dragon. He sent me to tell you that your weapon is with Kouji...but he knows.”

It wasn’t like he was surprised. Hideyoshi was far too insightful to begin with, and in this situation Takehiro could only blame his concussion in the decision not to tell him. “And by telling you he knows that you’re in on it too. Although it’s not like we’d have to hide it from you in the first place…”

“Yeah. Especially since he thinks we’re lovers.” The flush was gone now, replaced with a glumness he couldn’t quite decipher. Disappointment, certainly. But what else could be making her upset?

“You don’t have to look like that, Red. I am an extremely handsome man. Just ask the women I’ve been running from all night! Not that I blame them - I mean, just look at me. How could you resist?” When she merely sighed at his posturing, he knew something was wrong. Oh gods - she didn’t actually like him, did she? That would be awkward. “Something wrong?”

She looked to the side, in the direction of Hideyoshi’s retainers. When she didn’t immediately swing her gaze from them, the unpleasant suspicions Takehiro had harbored for months reaffirmed themselves - liking him was one thing, but she couldn’t possibly like Hideyoshi, could she?

“I’m just...disappointed. With myself. A little. I just…” She trailed off, finally making eye contact with her friend. There was no longing there, and Takehiro thought that if she was in love, at least it wasn’t with him. “I might be too tall.”

Takehiro choked on champagne bubbles. She could trust him with her ability, but not with her hypothetical crush on their superior? He was hurt, truly. “Yes, but that wasn’t what was making you upset. Let’s try the truth this time, shall we?”

“The truth is dishonorable. And it won’t be the truth for very long. I will get over this.”

Takehiro groaned internally. The infernal Shihoin code of honor! Between herself and her cousin all he heard was honor this, honor that...would it ever cease? “Feelings are not dishonorable, Red. It’s what you do with them. Are you going to act on them?”

She shook her head no, frowning at the floor.

“Then you’re fine. Now, I’ll name off a few men, and to affirm my guess, don’t react at all when I say his name. Ok. Lord Shibuya Takehiro, Master of All That Takes Breath-”

“I was under the impression you wanted to keep a low profile, Takehiro. Announcing your full name and uh, title doesn’t seem to be following that plan.”
It hadn’t been Karin who had interrupted him. Kouji sauntered up to them, smirking as he playfully tugged a wayward curl that had escaped from his cousin’s elaborate updo. She scowled, but shared a covert glance with Takehiro. Apparently - thankfully - Kouji hadn’t overheard enough to catch the gist of their conversation.

“Or am I interrupting something?” Kouji’s confidence was replaced with uncharacteristic hesitance, and it made the two of them step away from each other. Takehiro settled for merely rolling his eyes, but Karin’s reaction was definite.

“For the love of…! No. Why does everyone keep assuming that?”

Kouji’s eyebrows rose and he shared a glance with the rare kind. “I… won’t ask. I’ll just presume Aunt Kaede is involved.”

Takehiro couldn’t help himself. “Hideyoshi too.”

“Takehiro!”

A dry voice interrupted them, “I come to confer with my Shadow Unit and find I am the subject of their conversation. What an honor.”

Kouji turned immediately to face the newcomer, yet Karin and Takehiro winced. To be approached like this twice? What were the odds? Who would be next, the royal family? Actually, considering that Hikari was Red’s half-sister, this was a likely guess. As it was, they turned to face Fujiwara Hideyoshi, taking a small amount of refuge in the fact that he was not alone. Yet it was not his wife at his side, but a man who looked very like him, although slightly taller, and with shorter hair.

“Now that I have your attention, I would like to introduce my younger brother, Souri. Although not a power user himself, he has been honored by the king’s confidence, and is an important ambassador between Takama ga hara and the outside world.” All three bowed in unison, and Hideyoshi turned to his brother. “These three make up my Shadow unit - sanctioned by the king, of course. Shihoin Kouji you know, as the man of the hour. Here is his cousin, Karin, and my personal attendant, Takehiro.”

Takehiro lowered his gaze, as was befitting a commoner before a nobleman. Hideyoshi had not entrusted his brother with his surname, and that raised Takehiro’s guard. Glancing to the side, he saw that Kouji and Karin were not so circumspect - Kouji stepped forward to shake Souri’s hand, and Karin smiled warmly. Yet a quick glance at the field marshal confirmed Takehiro’s suspicion. Hideyoshi was watching the interaction carefully, under the guise of half-lowered lids. There was someone within the group he did not completely trust, and Takehiro was not so naive to assume it could not be his own brother.

Souri smiled warmly and Takehiro, had he not been on his guard, might have been completely taken in. “The honor is mine, I assure you. I’ve heard so much about the fabled Shihoin! And anyone who can put up with my brother’s demands must be a man of the highest calibre.” He extended his hand in turn not only to Takehiro, but to Karin as well. Takehiro caught Red’s glow of delight at being treated as an equal, and suspected that honest or not, Fujiwara Souri was dangerous. It was concluded when he held Red’s hand a beat too long, smiling across the distance. “I must admit, for my brother to be surrounded by such excellence makes me a little jealous…” He concluded by raising Red’s hands to his lips, in a western courtly display.

Snake. There was something a touch too possessive in Souri’s body language, and in the intensity of his gaze. It just didn’t fit - while Red wasn’t wholly unattractive, she was not the kind of woman that men came onto, especially on first meeting. Glancing over, he saw her bite her lip and knew
that she felt it too. “Th-thank you, Lord Fujiwara. But the honor is all ours.”

“Hideyoshi is a lucky man. Am I not right, brother?”

“I know my blessings.” His voice was low, and rasped like it did when he had depleted the extensive well of his patience. Takehiro knew this tone well, as he had become intimately acquainted with it over the last few years. “We must move on. We will leave you to your previous discussion.” He raised an eyebrow, affecting an amused facade, but Takehiro knew better. That was a paltry introduction, and one he would bet that Hideyoshi had cut short for reasons of his own. His suspicion was proven when the field marshal took advantage of his brother’s farewells to fix him with a stern look. Although no words were exchanged, Takehiro knew exactly what was being said: watch him.

There was no doubt about that, Takehiro decided as the brothers walked off leaving the newly dubbed Shadow Corps to their own devices. There had been something oily about Souri, dubious intentions towards Red aside. He would have to be careful. For unless he was very wrong - and that never happened - Fujiwara Souri had the potential to be a very dangerous man.

…

Chapter End Notes

And look who finally made his way to the party. Are there any (future) Prime Minister fans out there? Do people *like* him?

…

Also, I really, really like writing the Zed and Sakurako parts. They are just so damn funny to me.

…

Not sure how obvious I made Soutarou, but cookies if you can guess who he is!

…

Leave me some lovin’, friends.

…

Next chapter teaser: Kouji has a long day, full of Kyo, the king and Hikari. By the end, however, he may wish he had never met with any of them.
The morning after the celebratory ball found the citizens of Takama ga hara suffering from a number of maladies - sore feet among the ladies that danced; sore heads among the gentlemen that drank, and sore feelings from those who had chased after the young hero and not been given the time of day. The young hero himself was not feeling quite up to par, as late in the evening he had discovered - while taking refuge in the kitchen from some unspeakably determined young ladies - several jugs of the alcohol he had fallen in love with during his time in Europe. Consequently, he had spent the rest of the evening cradling a six-person serving of amber whiskey, relying on the sweet nectar to block out unfortunate memories: after all, he had never wanted to meet women that grabby...that desperate...that drunk.

He now had a plethora of reasons the next time the king asked why he was still single. He’d sooner marry a dragon and/or Takehiro, and that was saying something. Yet he had an audience with the king in less than an hour, and unless he wanted to attend them hungover, a bath was in order...but first, a quick session in the ring.

Kouji had assumed the training room to be empty, as the king had given the soldiers a day off. Yet even before he opened the doors he could feel the bursts of power stinging his skin, causing his blood to rise and his heart to sing. Here was opportunity, a challenge he had not expected when Fujiwara’s force had been recalled back home for the celebration. Yet it didn’t feel like Karin, and Takehiro felt like nothing at all - that meant there was new blood in the palace, and new talent to pit himself against!

He opened the door slowly, relying on his power rather than his hands. Once accomplished, there was just time enough to track the figure hurtling through the air towards him, and to fashion a cradle of wind to catch and keep them from breaking their neck against the doorframe. Kouji glanced up at the combatant, struggling against his invisible bonds.

“Ahh-!” Across the ring was a girl who, even at the distance, Kouji could clearly identify as his cousin, Sakurako. The resemblance to her mother was uncanny. Yet that meant the boy he had caught was the infamous Zed, the one with the power over death. Sure enough, wisps of black shadow began to form around the boy, and Kouji felt the wind struggle against it. Rather than
engage in a battle of wills, he lowered the boy gently to the floor. The boy still broke through his hold just before landing, and fell the last foot or so.

Sakurako had run up to help her friend yet skittered to a stop when she realized who had helped them. Her eyes widened, and Kouji steeled himself for the inevitable diatribe, assuming that Sakurako would take after her mother in more than just her looks. He winced, although he would never admit to it afterwards. Yet all his preparation was for naught.

“You- you're my cousin! The one who brought down the dragon!” Sakurako's eyes grew until they took up half her face, and when he looked closely, they appeared to be sparkling. “Zed, Zed! It's him!”

“Yes, Rako. I noticed.” The boy grumbled as he pushed himself to his feet, rolling his shoulders and flexing his muscles to check for injuries. His tone was low yet there was no ill-humor on his face. “You only threw me into him, after all.”

Hero worship temporarily forgotten, Sakurako adopted an expression of chastisement that Kouji was intimately familiar with through years of exasperating her mother. “Oh, don't be such a baby, Zed! I didn't throw you that hard. Besides, he caught you, didn't he?”

“Barely. Kyo’s told you that you have to work on controlling the outcome of your actions, and temper your strength. Not just to continue chucking me across the room.”

Sakurako swelled, and Kouji knew there was a very small window to head off the coming storm. He imagined his cousin's eruptions were no less violent than his aunt's. "Sparring, eh? With powers or with weapons?" He glanced back at Sakurako's weapon, safely sheathed on her back. Zed's was lying on the floor halfway across the room, where he had ostensibly dropped it when he was thrown. “Or a mix of both?”

From the appreciative glance Zed threw him, the boy knew exactly what Kouji had sidestepped. Sakurako didn't notice, as she launched into an excited retelling of their practice regimen. Kouji listened, amused. It had been a long time since a woman had been so excited for the right reasons – and he could see what his aunt had meant when she described her daughter as a tomboy. Perhaps he could work a bit of sparring in with the two teens, although he'd have to be careful not to get too excited. He still had his meeting with the king, after all.

Yet even before Sakurako finished, they were interrupted. “Taking a breather, eh? Didn't invite me for tea and cakes.” The king's illegitimate son stepped out from the storeroom, eyes flicking lazily over the scene. It had been years since Kouji had seen Kyo, yet he had not forgotten the power and presence of this man, and the nearly feral quality that frightened so many. Neither had he forgotten how dangerous he was, and how wild he could be, ready to attack at all times...

Kouji's only warning was a tremor in the air around his body, prompting him to throw up his arms in a defensive posture. Then, Kyo was against him, and had Kouji not been at the peak of his physical conditioning he would have been thrown backwards just like the boy. “Catch ya' unawares, pretty boy?”

Blood boiling, Kouji bared his teeth in a feral grin. “Never, your highness-”

They came together in a maelstrom of elemental and physical prowess, slinging hellfire and pressurized air until the very beams of the room sagged, and rivulets of flame trickled across the ground. Zed's katana found its way into Kouji's hands, and then they fought on two spheres – slicing and thrusting with weapons of metal, while augmenting their physical attacks with their element. Kouji found himself hard pressed as Kyo's swordplay, even without assistance from his
phenomenal ability, was easily at Shibuya's level. Twice he had to overcome vicious attacks that nearly shoved him back to the wall, yet even as he did so he couldn't help the gleam of excitement in his eyes, nor the wicked smile on his lips. Only when he was so close to death could he feel this alive. Forgetting all else – the children watching, his hangover, the king – Kouji gave in to the joy of battle, and realigned his every goal into landing a clean hit on the king's son.

Yet all good things must come to an end. All it took was one stumble, when Kouji arced too wide with his swordhand, and didn't adjust fast enough with his aerial wall. Kyo's blade flashed neatly against his throat, drawing a thin line of blood in its wake. Not enough to injure, merely enough to make his point – victory was Kyo's.

They broke apart, and Kouji needed a moment to recover himself. Not just physically, although the strain was ample enough, it was also to master the bloodlust that roared through his veins. His blood had been spilled, he must make him pay in equal measure...!

*This is the king's son,* Kouji told himself. *Kill him, and everything is over.* Yet even as he reassured himself, chanting it over in a mantra in his mind, there was a cold, quiet voice within him that knew the truth: he was outmatched. Even were he to surrender to his bloodlust, it would only end in his death.

“How long'll you be here?”

It took a moment to realize that Kyo had addressed him. It took a moment longer to ungrit his teeth. “I'm not sure. It depends on your father...and on the demon attacks.”

Kyo nodded before glancing over at the two awestruck teenagers. “And what the hell are you two standing around for? Get to fighting! You think you get to watch during a real battle?” Sakurako and Zed scattered, choosing to train with their powers rather than ask for Zed's katana, still firmly grasped in Kouji's left hand. He glanced down ruefully at it before extending it to Kyo.

“It's a good weapon. The boy's?”

Kyo gave him an assessing look as he took the blade. “It's on loan – the boy doesn't have much, but he needs to learn.” He dropped his voice before continuing. “Girl's better with it, but that's no surprise. Seems to run in the family.”

Kouji suspected it was the closest to a compliment the man ever came. “How are they in terms of power?”

“Well, she's got your Shihoin battle rage, and the boy can't bring himself to really hurt her. Disregarding that, I'd say she'll win 7 times out of 10...and he'd win 8 and-a-half.”

Kouji chose his next words carefully, casually. “Because his power's taboo?”

Kyo shrugged, clearly uninterested. “Maybe.”

“You don't care?”

“Why should I care? He's not strong enough to bring me down. As it is, the boy's a decent diversion. It'll only get more interesting the stronger he gets. Maybe someday he'll be strong enough to take me on for real. I hate being bored, Shihoin. Don't care who I fight as long as it's fun.”

“Well in that case...” Kouji trailed off, praying that he was reading this man correctly. “Ever fought somebody with two powers?”
He stiffened, and for a moment Kouji worried he had overstepped the mark. Those born with two abilities were rare, and had, in bygone times, been considered strong contenders for the throne. Yet Karin's foreignness kept her from that, and she had no ambitions in that arena. “...No. You saying you know somebody with two?”

“Depends. Can you keep it from your father?” Ever since Kouji had learned that Zed had been protected by the king's son, he had put quite a bit of thought into his plans to protect Karin. Her power wouldn't stay hidden forever, especially now that she was best friends with a rare kind. If she could impress Kyo and earn his protection, she would not have another sparring partner to train her taboo power, she would be safe.

“I won't tell him. But I can't promise anything else.”

Kouji bit back a sigh, reminding himself to move slowly. Things would work out; they always did. “Well. If you ever find yourself in need of a good spar...I might know of someone you can talk to.”

Kyo growled, taking his gaze away from his students. “Cut the shit. It's either your cousin or the field marshal's man, and I haven't heard anything good about them yet. So unless you're telling me they're stronger than you-”

Kouji was annoyed, but managed to catch himself just in time. Kyo seemed tolerant of taboo abilities, but had said nothing about rare kinds. “You think you're the first to beat me in a spar? Please. I know exactly which one of them stands a chance of defeating you, but you're not facing either of them until I have your word.” He held Kyo's gaze for a long moment, until Sakurako's crow of victory distracted them. The girl stood over Zed, smiling triumphantly and trying to not glance over at the two men watching them.

“I'll think about it. If you want, you can stop by and spar sometime. Keep me from getting bored.” The heir lifted his broad shoulders and held them until they cracked. “Ain't nobody stopping you.”

“I'll think about it.” Kouji mimicked his words on purpose, and had to bit back a grin when he saw Kyo scowl. “Might want to train with them instead.” Laughing, he walked over to the teens, hoisting Zed up. The kid was less in awe of him than his cousin, and for that Kouji liked him. “Now, you have to forget she's a girl. You're holding back, and that's not going to win you any battles. So let's try it again, but I want to see you really go at her this time. Whoever loses has to stop training for the day.”

Both Zed's and Sakurako's eyes grew round. They had only just begun, and to be stopped so soon after witnessing such an inspiring bout? They glared fiercely at each other, determined to win.

“Ok, go-!”

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By the time Kouji remembered his interview with the king, he was nearly an hour late. Kyo had made an offhand comment about the state of his father's office, and it was all Kouji needed to send him careening through the palace, not even bothering to wash up first. Thankfully Matsuhiro's office was quite close to the training room, and within a minute of his realization he was knocking
on the door to the king's chamber. As soon as the door opened, Kouji was prepared to make 
amends. “My deepest apologies, my lord. I met your son, and lost track of the time – it is entirely 
my fault.”

The king lounged at his desk, looking both at ease and out of place. The previous ruler had 
been a traditionalist, and Matsuhiro's obsession with the western world had worried many of noble 
血。He had lobbied hard for change, however, and seen it implemented. If there was still 
something jarring in his juxtaposition between asian and western, Kouji would be careful never to 
voice it. Thankfully, the king seemed to be in a good mood, judging by the amused curve of his 
lips. “Yes, training with Kyo tends to have that effect on people...if they survive. I had wondered 
when the two of you would meet. I'm sure there's much you can learn from each other.”

Kouji bowed low. “Indeed. I'm looking forward to our next session.” Briefly, he thought of 
mentioning Sakurako and Zed, as well – surely the king knew that Zed was training them – but 
some inner caution held him back. “He's amazing, my lord. I've never fought an opponent like 
that.”

Matsuhiro's smile grew guarded, although he bowed his head in acknowledgement. “The 
boy has always been extraordinary. It's too bad he and Hikari can't get along. I'd like to have him 
here with me more often, but my wife does not...” He trailed off, looking for a diplomatic way to 
phrase their mutual hatred “…take to him as well as I would like.”

Kouji was by no means a political man. Any evidence to the contrary was the product of 
special effort, and left him feeling disgusted with himself for hours. Yet even he had heard of the 
queen's abhorrence of Matsuhiro's illegitimate son, and her unexpected demand upon his wedding 
proposal. He also knew that wild horses could not drag the admission out of him.

Perhaps the king was a thoughtful mood, as he kept going without Kouji's input. “I suppose 
I understand – an illegitimate heir is a difficult pill to swallow. But what was I supposed to do? 
Poor Shouko died in childbirth, and she was a woman who could not be replaced. I never thought 
to marry again after her, but I could not let my selfish sentimentality compromise the throne! It was 
not a pretty situation, but what else could I do? I never imagined I'd meet a woman like Hikari…”

The king had been devastated when his first wife, Queen Shouko had died nearly 40 years 
ago. They had married young and their union had heralded a bloom of prosperity throughout the 
kingdom. That she would die only 2 years into their marriage shocked everyone, and the king had 
spiraled into depression. No one questioned him when he took a concubine, and later kept the fruit 
of their temporary union. No one until his second wife, who had asked the unthinkable – to put 
away his only child in favor of her future progeny. Worse still was that no such child existed, even 
after several years of marriage.

Personally, Kouji thought Hikari was being unreasonable, especially when she showed no 
sign of pregnancy. And after sparring with Kyo, he couldn't imagine a more powerful ruler. “I 
admire your personal honor in keeping the promise, my lord, but perhaps you are taking it too far? 
Speaking as her cousin, I do not agree with her selfishness. If she had a child, perhaps things would 
be different. As it is...I cannot imagine anyone other than Kyo ruling after you.”

Matsuhiro chuckled, rubbing his hands against his temples. “Yes, it's all quite simple in 
black and white...or to someone else. Wait until you are married, my boy. Then you'll understand 
the power women hold over their husband.”

Kouji thought back to the women who had chased him during the ball, and thought 
uncharitable thoughts about the sacred institution of matrimony. The day he'd get married would 
be the day he'd find a woman as wild as him and he didn't anticipate that day ever arriving.
“In the meantime, however, perhaps you could speak with her? Perhaps Karin would as well? I think it would mean more coming from you - I know she's always looked up to you. And since your father's trip to the mainland, you have been acting as head of the family.”

The last thing Kouji wanted to do was to come in between the king and queen in their marital dispute. He suspected that was the reason that his father had taken off at the first sign of trouble, as there was no other practical reason for an extended trip to the mainland of Japan. Even worse, how in god's name was he supposed to talk to Hikari about this when her hold on her emotions was tenuous at best? He had spent the entire ball avoiding her simply so he wouldn't be subjected to her uncomfortable glances...or to undergo conversation fraught with the memories she refused to let go of. Yet how could he refuse? “I...will do my best, my lord. Although I've never had any luck with persuading her in the past.”

Matsuhiro clapped him on the shoulder, nearly causing Kouji to stumble forward. “It's all I can ask of you, my boy. She should be with Sakurako soon, but tends to frequent her garden in the evenings. Remember, I'm counting on you. Good luck.”

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It took Kouji several days to work up the courage to approach Hikari at the king's request. Besides his personal unwillingness to discuss anything of an emotional nature with her, he had no idea how to actually go through with it – he had always steered clear of an emotional entanglement, and when he tried to plan what he would say his mind went blank. Finally he broached the subject with Karin, but that was no better. She felt sorry for her sister, but her opinion had been definite: Tell her she's being selfish, she had said. Doesn't she have to be a queen before a woman?

He agreed, but there was no way he could say such a thing outright. Especially when the sentiment could be twisted to reflect her old feelings for him.

It was Fujiwara who offered up the best advice, asked in desperation when Takehiro could not be found. Make her present her case rationally. She is an intelligent woman; you should challenge her to see the logic in your position. Kouji wasn't sure married women were necessarily shining examples of rationality, (especially married Shihoins) but the field marshal was married and so Kouji would have to trust in his experience.

He spent the rest of the day outlining his case, although in truth it could have taken him only five minutes. It all boiled down to Hikari's childlessness and Kyo's inherent right to rule – his ability alone proved that. Yet as evening grew nearer his reluctance grew. Would his cousin see reason? Or would she make things difficult by clinging to the past? Gods' teeth, what if she started to cry? To entertain such thoughts was to invite defeat, however, so Kouji put it and all thoughts like it out of his mind. Hikari and he would have a calm, rational discussion, and even if he could not influence her decision, they would be adults.

Kouji kept telling himself that every step on his way to the garden. It was one of the few places where Hikari was expected to be alone, ensuring their talk would remain private and that no rumor of discord between the royal couple could emerge. Of course, a cynical minded person could also begin rumors to the effect on an affair between the queen and a potential lover, although Kouji was an unlikely candidate – both as her cousin and his own man. Even if the woman was Hikari...or perhaps especially because the woman was Hikari.
Kouji slowly opened the sliding door, instinctively breathing deep. The air was scented with the flowers that bloomed at night, opening their petals in worship of the moon. Personally, he found the current aroma more enjoyable than the daytime mélange: it was spicy and subtle, rather than the sickly sweet of daytime. A figure bobbed low at the corner of his vision, and he whirled instinctively, preparing for the worst. A second glance revealed it to be none other than Hikari, who had bent down to check the roots of some exotic flower. Kouji sighed, feeling foolish. He was more keyed up than he had realized. Maybe he could return to the warfront soon – then he could do something useful rather than playing couples counsellor.

Kouji waited until his cousin straightened before addressing her. “Good evening, my lady. I was told you might be here. May I have a moment of your time?”

She turned to him with a smile on her face, that dimmed immediately upon making eye contact. Kouji was unsure of the evolution of her powers during the last six years, but he suspected she saw enough of his personal reticence to turn her unfounded joy into reserve. Hopefully she could not simply read his intent, as he had spent far too long drafting his argument. “Good evening, Kouji. I see you have something important to talk to me about. Let me guess: you are being sent off to the front again?”

Kouji bit back his relief, along with his fierce desire to prove her correct. After this, he would speak to the king. But for now... “Not at all, cousin. I merely needed to ask your opinion on someone I trained with today – as both a power user and Queen.”

There was no need to name him. Hikari could see Kyo's image in Kouji's eye as clearly as if he stood in front of her. Her dislike was just as evident. “I suppose you would be drawn to him, powerful as you both are. But he is a barbarian, Kouji, wild beyond your imagination! There are rumors of him taking as he pleases, whether food, land, or women! I don't know why Matsuhiro does not simply cut him off – there is no future for Takama ga hara if that man is to rule!” She was heaving with emotion by the time she finished, eyes bright and fists clenched.

“And have you been able to verify these rumors?”

She hesitated. “Not exactly. He refuses to meet my eyes, and avoids my presence. I have been unable to read him, and he has told Matsuhiro that he would not let me be privy to his secrets. Is that not an admission of guilt? Can such a man be trusted?”

It was damning, Kouji had to admit. Although it also did not prove Hikari's fears true. There could be other secrets the man held. Besides, Kouji was in no position to judge. The few damning secrets of his own were kept only because Hikari refused to look too deeply – both from her trust, and her fear of seeing his definitive, platonic feelings for her. “I understand your fear, but it does not prove his guilt. Merely that the man has secrets, and no one begrudges him that...”

Hikari's arms flew up. “You're not listening! All you want is to acquit your training partner! Ahh- I see how it is. Matsuhiro sent you, to see if you could change my mind.” She clenched both her fists and her jaw. “You may as well give up. I will not budge – he has promised me my child will be the heir, and that Kyo will be disinherited. He has given his word, and unless he wishes to forfeit his honor, he must abide by it!”

Kouji took in her heaving shoulders, and the mad glint in her eye. Something was wrong, and he should have realized it sooner. No matter how much she wanted a child on the throne, Kyo could not be the sole reason Hikari was this upset. He decided to forge onwards, and see what tipped her over the edge. “There will be nothing to abide by if you can't give him a child, Hikari. I'm not blaming you – but to cut Kyo away before you have even conceived is madness. Surely you know this?”
Hikari bristled. “I will conceive-”

“It's been two years, cousin. If it were as simple as wanting, it would already be done.”

“I am not infertile!”

Kouji wished, fervently, to be anywhere other than here, not having this conversation with a maddened female. “I am not saying you are. All I am saying is that you are childless. Therefore, Hikari, please wait. If you want your child on the throne that badly, at least wait until you have...one...” He trailed off, wishing even more fervently than he had before. Hikari’s rage had abruptly run its course, leaving a weeping woman in its wake. Apparently he had found her tipping point. Why had he thought this was a good idea?

“I...try, but...” She wrapped her arms around herself, looking impossible small and delicate. “I know I'm- I'm- old now, and I keep th-thinking of Ma-Ma-Matsuhiro and the co-concubine and- and...” She choked, yet the words came spilling out of her like water through a broken dam. “I tried! I try still but I can feel him, and I know that I am just a poor replacement for his dead wife! And- and I...I know that he is just...a poor replacement for you.”

Her last words were barely a whisper, yet the wind brought it to Kouji's ears. He stepped away from her. Even though he pitied her, more than he had ever pitied anyone, he loved his king and his country more. So it was that at the moment she needed him most; needed his comfort and security that he could not give it to her. Hikari saw this and covered her face with her hands.

Her grief cut between them as she sobbed in the garden. Finally, Kouji could take it no longer. “Hikari...I am sorry. But you ask the impossible. You must let it go.”

She looked just as she had years ago, when she had first professed her love. “I can't. I've tried. And you were gone so long...I thought I had. But I can't stop loving you, I can't-”

“You must. You are the queen. You have made your choice, cousin. You cannot change it now.”

There was nothing she could say. She turned from him, slowly making her way down the aisle of exotic flowers, hunching over like a woman thrice her age. Kouji watched her until she had turned down another row and left his sight. It was then that he formed his resolve. He could take no more of this - he would leave in the morning, and he would not say goodbye. If it were up to him, he would not return until one of two things happened – the monsters had been driven from their lands, or Hikari conceived.

He suspected he knew which might happen first.

Chapter End Notes

You may have noticed that half the characters throw down immediately upon meeting another character. No, I don't know why I’m doing this either.

...I’m going to be honest. I just spent the whole last week working stupid hours, reading copious amounts of Jane Austen, and then playing Injustice. It’s a good thing I’ve still got some of this in reserve, because I feel like a very undisciplined writer right now.

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Next chapter teaser: Father and daughter have a loaded conversation, and Rui fields an unfortunate phone call.
Family

Chapter Summary

In which family moments feature and Heike makes everyone uncomfortable.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Sakura watched from the balcony as her friends trained. She had done this before, back when they were preparing for the war against Eden. There was comfort in the nostalgia, even when watching such violent acts. Otherwise, seeing Toki with a face full of blood from his spar with Ogami, and Yuuki popping his dislocated shoulder back in during his bout with Prince would be far more distressing. As it was, it was par for the course with them. She shouldn't be disturbed now, she should be thankful for the time they had spent honing their skills. During the war with Eden it had ultimately come down to Toki and Ogami, although Yuuki and Prince had helped them every step of the way. Between them Ogami was indisputably the strongest of the Code:Breakers, but it was heartening to see the great strides the others had made.

It was also fascinating to watch Kouji, Karin, and Shibuya train with them. There were plenty of dream sequences of them training – flashes of them sparring one on one or every man for himself, interspersed with the main storyline. It was something else to see them do it in person. Her father's speed, agility, strength, and cunning had only increased with age, and he didn't have to hold his rare kind ability back. Yet his method of training was already well known to the Code:Breakers, and so they would spend the afternoon training with the Shihoin cousins for a change of pace.

After lunch they split off into pairs. Rui and Toki would train first with Karin, who would teach them to fight against her internal manipulation. Ogami and Yuuki would face Kouji and his arsenal of defensive and offensive wind attacks. Sakura expected her father to assist his old friends, or at the very least annoy his old students, but was surprised when he joined her on the balcony instead. He made a show of removing his cap and wiping the sweat from his brow. “I'll say this for them: none of them know when to quit. I suppose it's a good thing. Something's gotta' make up for how annoying they can be.”

The twinkle in his eye offset his words. Sakura knew how grateful her father was for every person who accepted him, if not outright liked him. All his students were dear to him, and it was with this in mind that she responded. “Well, they did learn from the best.”

“I hope that was in response to their tenacity, and not about me being annoying, darling.”

Sakura merely smiled, and Shibuya clutched a hand to his heart, sighing dramatically. “Ahh! Now even my own daughter has turned against me! What has become of young people these days? My heart – it breaks!”

Sakura snorted as she took her father's arm, preventing any further theatrics. “You know what I
meant, Father. And regardless of how vexing you all may be, I love you all dearly.” Before her father could do anything other than sputter, she moved on. “But have you heard from Mother? Sakurako, I mean. Did she and Zed find anything? Is he doing better?”

Shibuya smiled fondly down at her before ruffling her hair. “They're doing fine. Better than Kouji made out. I spoke with Zed earlier and he said they'd be here in a week – they have a couple more leads to track down, and then they'll be here to help train. Sakurako sends her love, of course.”

Sakura smiled, but it was distracted. Her gaze had fallen on Rui, who had just hit the ground hard under one of Karin's attacks. There was no visible blood, so it must have been from some internal injury. Before Karin could press the advantage Toki was there to distract her, pushing her back from his injured partner. In the meantime, Rui pushed herself up and then entered back into the fray.

Shibuya watched as well, yet there was something else on his mind. “Sakura...what do you think about your mother's parts of the story?”

She pulled her attention away from the sparring below to gather her thoughts. “Well...in some ways she's very much the same – at least in personality. I can see why she earned the nickname 'The Amazon!' Besides that... it was interesting to see that she still passes on her power through a kiss – and it makes more sense why she even started doing so. I wonder when she starts infusing dolls with her power? That's much like her uncle, the craftsman... It’s all very interesting to think about. Ahh, and I hadn't realized she and Zed had always been so close.” She smiled up at her father. “Truthfully, I kind of like the story, and that's my favorite part: I like seeing how you all knew each other, and how you interacted back then. Although I will admit, I'm curious to see how you and Kyo, er, Code:Emperor will meet...and even more so when you and Mother will.”

Shibuya smiled weakly. “Ah, yes. If you're waiting for that you might be waiting for a long time. Your mother and I didn't meet until after the kingdom fell...and the Four Founders rose to power. I'm not sure how much we should show you all beyond the destruction of the dragon...and the kingdom’s fall. Anything else and we may need Heike to be here as well – he'd know much more about what happened next.”

“Of, that reminds me. How is Maka able to show things that happened to Mother, and Heike when they're not here?”

“Part of Sakurako’s remembrances come from me. Your mother and I used to talk quite a bit, believe it or not. Beyond that, Sakurako and Maka know each other and she's passed on some things already. Likewise, as Zed and Maka don't like each other, he has refused to pass on his memories, and that's why none of the tale is from his perspective.” Shibuya shrugged, eyes tracking Toki's progress as he attempted to use a variant of gauss cannon on Karin. “They weren't needed, however. Zed and Sakurako were inseparable until...well, until we got married. There's very little that happened to them that they did not share.” He shot her a guarded look, gauging her reaction. “It's very similar to how they are today. Even more so since Eden fell.”

There was something in her father's tone that made her think there was more to the story. Before she could question him further, however, their attention was caught by the roar of flame below: Ogami had summoned one of the seven demons, Belphegor.

“Ahh, so he's already getting a little bit serious...”

Sakura agreed with her father's observation. Yuuki was ill-equipped to handle Kouji, although he had made a good showing of himself. Yet even his sonic speed could not pierce through Kouji's aerial wall, and so it was up to Ogami and his hell-flame to break down Kouji's defense. Nodding
to each other, the two Code:Breakers attacked in tandem.

On the other side of the room, Rui supported a flagging Toki, who had borne the brunt of Karin's attacks. He was covered in blood – both his and her own – and was quickly running out of tricks. Rui seemed to be in better shape, although she was currently in her Empress Paradox form and had been for quite some time. Their only chance was to take Karin out quickly, otherwise they both ran the risk of burning out.

Sakura fought down the instinctive worry for her friends. It would not matter in the long run if they lost today. They had lost many, many times to Shibuya and it had only made them stronger. Yet she had remembered them as the strongest for six long years, and it was jarring for them to topple off the pedestal she had created in her mind.

“Well, Sakura. If you're ready, there's a bit of training I should put you through. I know you want to watch, but I have a feeling we won't have too much time later. Yuuki and Toki will probably enter their lost forms soon, at any rate.”

Training? For her? Her blood rushed with excitement – she had continued her aikido training in university, but had fallen behind as of late. Perhaps her father would teach her to move as quickly as he? “Of course, Father. Whenever you're ready.” She dropped down into a defensive crouch.

Shibuya took one look at his daughter and snorted. “No, dear. Not that kind of training. I'll need to teach you how to make the rare kind serum. I know you haven't gone small in over a year, but it's something you need to learn. Just in case.”

Sakura straightened, somewhat rueful that he hadn't meant physical training. “But I thought the serum could only be made with Pandora's Box?” As soon as she finished she realized her error, as her father had been making it far before December 32nd had occurred.

“It just made the process easier. I'll teach you the recipe, and have you make a few practice batches. The most important ingredient is our blood, so as long as you have some of that you should be ok.”

“Now?”

“No better time, darling.”

Sakura nodded and took one last look at her friends below, lingering on Ogami. Even after all this time and recent aggravation, there was a part of her that needed to know where he was, how he was doing, and whether he was safe. It was even more so right now, when he was pushing himself and his abilities, potentially putting his life on the line.

Yet it would be far worse when they faced their enemies. Sakura shook her head, tearing her gaze from Ogami. There was no assurances in their lives, no safety nets or take backs. There was little time for personal grievances and chances for forgiveness. The next time she saw him she would apologize, and assure him that from now on, she would always be on his side. It was the little she could control when he cut her so effectively out of his life.

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In the end, it was exactly as Shibuya had guessed. Yuuki and Toki entered their lost forms within a few minutes of each other, leaving Rui and Ogami to face the full might of their teachers. Rui had buckled within the space of a few more minutes, although Karin had announced herself impressed with both of them, and congratulated them warmly. This was cold comfort when faced with Rei's accomplishment. He had Kouji's back to the wall by the time he had summoned Mammon, and Shibuya had to interrupt their fight in order to spare the mansion from any more damage. Although the spar would have ended in his loss, Kouji was delighted as well, and he promised Rei that soon he'd be ready to take two or three of them on at once. Judging by the wary look on Rei's face, Kouji's enthusiasm was not something he had expected.

Yet then Kouji had turned his attention from Rei to herself, with that careful look she had learned to hate. When she was young there had only been two occasions for that look and they were serious injury, or her time of the month – or, more accurately due to her athletic lifestyle – her three-or-four-times-a-year. Otherwise he had always known precisely what to say to her, and was completely in control. He had even been the one to (eventually) talk her out of her bedroom the other day, when she had been unable to extricate herself from the dregs of her dream, and reality and fantasy had threatened to coalesce.

Yet something had changed since his portion of the story, when his cousin had professed her undying love for him. Rui had wept when the dream ended and she had been unable to tell him why. How could she tell him that she sympathized with the queen so strongly it felt like her own heart was broken?

“You did well, my comrade.”

His voice was low, subdued, and utterly unlike him. Rui hated this even more than the heartbreaking aspects of the story. By running away and hiding from him she had made him handle her like she was made of glass, and she couldn't stand it. Perhaps she could forgive herself for reacting badly yesterday – Karin had vaguely explained that she had woken up too soon, and that the blood had somehow magnified the effects of her dream – but she had reacted immaturely long before that. It was her fault that Kouji was so uncomfortable around her, and she really had to get her act together. Especially if it began affecting her training. Tomorrow she would face him, and if she wasn't at the top of her game, Kouji would be right in saying that women were inferior combatants when they allowed their hearts to overpower their heads. So she merely nodded in response to his compliment, not trusting herself to attempt a smile. She did manage to meet his gaze, if only for a moment.

She made to move past him, but his arm on her bicep stopped her. Her eyes flew to his as she inhaled raggedly, and every sensory nerve in her body centered in on the warmth of his hand. He hadn't really touched her since he had returned from his six year journey, and the warmth of his hand made her heart flutter.

His eyes were deep and dark as they searched hers. “Rui, I-”

“Prince! The phone's for you!” Sakura called from the top of the stairs, completely unaware of what she had just interrupted. Yet the moment could not be salvaged. Disappointment flickered in his gaze, and Rui felt the blood rush to her cheeks. Headbutting Kouji was an impossibility, so there was nothing else to do but remove herself. She made her way up the stairs, hating a wide variety of things including everyone in Shibuya's mansion, whomever was calling her, cement stairways, and air.

Thankfully, Sakura was no longer there when Rui reached the kitchen phone, otherwise she may
have gotten headbutted out of sheer disappointment. She picked the phone up off the hook.

“Hello.”

“Somehow, I get the feeling it’s a bad time. But hello to you too, Rui.” Yukihina’s voice was rich and low, even when in his lost form. Funny, but he had been in his lost form yesterday, too...she must have caught him right at opposite ends of his 24 hour-long female period. Still, hearing from him/her made Rui’s spirits rise considerably.

“Oh, Yuki! Hey! Is this about business, or about what we talked about yesterday?” Rui finished in a whisper, glancing around the kitchen even though everyone else was very likely on a different floor of the house.

“A little of both, really. Although I did think of something I’d like to add to our talk from yesterday.”

Even though no one was around to see or hear her, Rui blushed. In her madness, she had called the confidant of her youth and had told all about her dream experience. Predictively, she had dreamt of Kouji. Yet she had dared more yesterday than she had throughout the rest of her life. She remembered only flashes of her dream test but there had been a white dress, stained glass windows set in the curved window of a cathedral, and a man with a scar and a smile waiting for her at the altar. Beyond that were somatic memories: the weight and warmth of him in her arms, of the fire his touch inflicted, and at the end, the gurgle of a happy child. She had admitted everything to Yukihina, who had listened much and said little beyond his/her promise not to tell Heike or Kouji.

“Y-Yes? What is it?” She twined the coiled cord between her fingers, unsure of whether her nerves or her excitement would win out.

“Well, in terms of how he feels about you – you do know he loves you, right? I mean, the man raised you. That much should be obvious. Whether or not it’s as a man for woman or a father for his daughter...that’s the part you have to worry about.”

Rui sagged against the kitchen counter, letting the cord fall from her fingers. And here she had been expecting something she didn’t already know! “I...I know that, Yuki!” She brought her free hand to her forehead, rubbing her temples and mentally chastising herself for getting so excited.

“That's the part I'm worried about!”

“Really? Shouldn't you be more worried about your own feelings?”

Rui paused her massage. “Wait, what? Why should I be worried?” She immediately leapt to the worst conclusion. “You mean in case he doesn't return my feelings? In that case, yes. Yes, I have considered that, and believe me - I have worrying about that completely under control.”

Yukihina's exasperation was evident as soon as he/she began speaking. “No, Rui. I mean are you sure you know how you feel for him? You're sure you love him as a man? He's been your father figure for about the last twenty years. Think of it this way: could you kiss him without it being awkward? Could you more than kiss him without it getting awkward?”

She had walked up the aisle in that white, white dress and hadn't listened to a word the priest said. There had been nothing but Kouji at her side, and his dark, hooded eyes, and then his lips against hers and the fire in her belly. The remembrance pushed her answer past her sense of propriety.

“Yes.”

“Huh. Hadn't expected that. Good thing I'm not there, else you'd have headbutted me by now...well, problem's solved. You're in love! Good luck, Rui.”
Her face flushing crimson, Rui sank down the wall until she rested on her heels. “I know th- I mean...ugh. I hate you so, so much, Yukihina...”

“Well, you all are about to hate me a medium-sized amount more. Maybe. Probably.”

That pricked her ears, and she remembered that he had some business to discuss as well. “Ahh, is this about your and Heike's mission? I'm assuming you're not coming back, then?”

“Nope. We're nowhere near finished chasing down all of the Fujiwara's assets. Heike's being thorough; you know how he is. He did tell me to say good luck, and that he has the utmost faith in all of you, though.”

Rui picked up the cord again, absentmindedly winding it around her wrist. “I see. I'll pass that along to Shibuya; I'm sure he'll want to know. I'm not sure that will make anyone hate you though. Or is there more?”

There was a moment of silence, and Rui steeled herself. Had they found something? Some plot or ploy that had outlived Fujiwara? “Yuki? What is it?”

“I may be...pregnant.”

Rui dropped the phone.

…”

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…”

It took twenty minutes, three shots of whisky, and finally a slap across the face (administered by a gleeful Shibuya) to rouse Rui from her stupor. Even then she was in no condition to explain why the phone was still hanging off the hook and the dial tone was clearly audible. Shibuya had resorted to pantomimes in order to get even the smallest sign of life--yelling directly into her ear seemed to have no effect. Prince simply stared straight ahead, lips moving in an unreadable pattern.

Kouji was called for, yet even his presence did nothing. He was the one to make out a few of the words she was mouthing: Yuki and impossible and baby. None of it made sense, however, until Heike called back.

Shibuya put him on speakerphone, ignoring Rui's moan of protest. The Code:Breakers huddled around -Yuuki purring away on Toki's small lap; Rei lounging near the doorway opposite from Sakura; Kouji bending down close to Rui so that he could ostensibly handle her whisky intake, and Karin standing at Shibuya's side, nearest to the phone. Heike's voice filled the kitchen, from half the world away. “Hello, everyone! I am sorry to report that Yukihina and I will remain in the United States for a while yet – our mission does not seem to be wrapping itself up anytime soon! But I'm sure you'll all have a lot of fun fighting the ancient baddies!” He chuckled, and all the Code:Breakers scowled. There was a reason none of them missed him, and that was pretty much it.

“To continue: important news are in order! But perhaps you already know...Yukihina informs me he has already told Prince after all.” He paused for dramatic effect, and it was then that Rui covered her face in her hands and groaned audibly.

Heike's hearing had always been sharp. “Ahhh, I see that he has! Well, just in case she hasn't told everyone – congratulations are in order! I have knocked up Yukihina's lost form! In nine months, we will be fathers!”
Kouji, who had just taken a surreptitious swig of Rui's whisky, promptly turned his head and sprayed it all over Shibuya's and Karin's legs. Behind him, there was a thump as Toki, still clasping Yuuki, fell off his chair. Shibuya and Karin looked on in horror as Rei froze. How was that even possible? Thinking it over, he supposed that in a world filled with power users and rare kinds, and risen, magical monsters from the past, a pregnant man was nothing. Yukihina's lost form was female, after all...

Heike continued, undaunted. “Yes, we're very excited. Although, perhaps Yukihina is more excited to retain his true form – he's been a woman for almost a week now, and he's getting a little annoyed. We’ve just begun debating name options. What does everyone think?”

“Hang up,” Shibuya whispered to Karin. “For the love of all that is holy, hang the damn phone up!”

“...wedding date to follow. In terms of godparents, we were thinking—”

Rather than fumble with the speakerphone or even depress the switchhook, Karin merely ripped the cord from the wall. Silence filled the kitchen, yet the echo of Heike's message rang through their minds. Yukihina...pregnant...godparents.

Heike was going to be a parent.

Sakura began to speak but Toki was faster. His hand was over her mouth before she could do more than squeak in surprise. Yuuki admonished her from the corner of his mouth. “Not now, Nyanmaru!”

At their feet, Kouji slumped forward so that his head was nearly resting against Rui's shoulder. Yukihina had been his comrade for decades, and to hear that he had allowed his long-time enemy to impregnate his lost form was a serious blow. He understood and accepted their feelings for each other, but to willingly spend nine months in his lost form? To raise a child together? Worst yet, he knew exactly who the godfather was going to be. He was the only Re:Code Heike didn't detest, and had been Yukihina's best friend for far too long.

He groaned, and his head finally touched down on Rui's shoulder. A sharp intake of breath above him brought him back to himself, however. He jerked up and looked into her wide-eyed panic. There was only a moment to assess the situation: on the plus side, he had completely torn through her shock. On the negative side, he was (probably) about to be headbutted.

Shibuya winced as he shook the whisky from his khakis. Next to him, Karin did the same. He turned to his other side to see if Ogami had been in the blast zone but the boy was gone. Reminiscing about his own childhood, perhaps? Or simply unable to stomach the idea of Heike and Yukihina raising a child? Both viable options, Shibuya supposed, until he glanced over at his own daughter, and took in the spots of color high on her cheeks and the way her gaze never wavered from the spot where Ogami had stood. A horrible question niggled its way to the forefront of his mind: did Sakura wish to have children of her own? Had Heike's announcement made that desire apparent? And had Ogami seen all that?

In terms of Sakura, if it existed Ogami would know. He had been stalking her for the past six years, and probably knew things about her that even Shibuya didn't know. If his hypothesis was correct, Ogami's disappearance made much more sense. When the woman you loved wanted something, you wanted nothing more than to give it to her. To be unable to could be – was, Shibuya reminded himself – a pain that bordered on the physical. Ogami had been right to remove himself from the situation, but to be left behind with his daughter's pain... Shibuya glanced over at Karin, who glanced from Sakura, back to him. She smiled grimly, tilting her head towards her
cousin, who now lay flat on the floor, playfully blocking Rui’s half-hearted, embarrassed blows.

*Go on,* she mouthed. *Family first.*

*He's flirting,* Shibuya mouthed back, eyes flicking to Kouji. *Wonders never cease.*

She snorted, and then they broke apart, ignoring Yuuki and Toki and the latter’s attempt to explain to the former why they were a) not going to the hypothetical wedding, and b) were also going to be on separate continents on the appointed day. No, they were not arguing about this. Yes, Yuuki could listen in from, say, Bermuda.

Shibuya reached Sakura then, and gave her a one armed hug. He racked his brain for something comforting, but Sakura had other ideas.

She looked down at the floor and asked in a voice too quiet to be overheard by anyone other than Yuuki who was currently distracted by his argument with Toki, “Do you still love Mother?”

Shibuya’s mouth went dry, and he cursed himself for not following through with the conversation he had hinted at earlier. Yet now was not the time. “...Yes.”

She looked at him, and in her gaze there was no space for evasion. Was this how she looked at Ogami? No wonder the boy had fallen so irrevocably. “Do you love her the way you used to?”

They had been apart for so many years now. It was an unfair question, with an uncomfortable answer. Yet her situation was no different, and she would pay for his and Sakurako’s decision all her life. Therefore, she deserved the truth. “...No. We love each other very much, almost as much as we love you...but we are no longer husband and wife, darling. That part of our life ended a long time ago. We have moved on.” All of this was truth, but explaining it all to his daughter caused a lump to rise in his throat. He knew exactly how she felt. She was young and in love, and never wanted to let that go. He also knew it was a primary factor in her determination to see the power users as an accepted part of their world, in both a social and legal sense. But she had to understand that some things were impossible, no matter the age they were in.

With this in mind, he hadn’t expected her to look up at him and smile. “I understand, Father. I feel a little better now. Thank you.” She threw her arms around him, grip tighter than would be safe on a normal human being. Shibuya returned the gesture, ignoring the chaos in the kitchen around them. Some things were more important than friendship, or even romantic love, he thought. This was one of them.

Chapter End Notes

Chapters ended with daddy/daughter hug: 2. Less tears in this one = improvement.

Angsty!Ogami says leave five reviews a piece. :D
Festering Truths

Chapter Summary

In which a poet speaks, and things are best left unseen

Chapter Notes

I just realized I uploaded the wrong chapter 10, so if you'd like to have a slightly better understanding of who the poet is, turn back and read the conversation between Karin and her aunts once more.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1898

It was half past 8 in the morning, and Karin was currently engaged in her least favorite athletic pastime: running for her life.

“Get back here!”

She rounded a corner at full speed, barely dodging the maid that squeaked and leapt to the side. She could only hope the man chasing her wasn't so lucky. Although that was quite cruel to the maid...

“Shihoin!”

Breathing harshly, Karin attempted to recreate a map of the palace in her head. She had dashed east, and passed through the great hall about a minute ago, so anytime now she would be racing past Hikari's chambers...ah! Skidding to a stop, she nearly tripped over the decorative vase perched outside the door frame. Trembling, she gripped the handle of the door and threw herself into safety. She leaned back against the door, yet jumped forward when the man banged his fists against the wood.

“Hiding is for pussies, you hear me? I can wait all day, sweetheart! Can't hide behind the queen's skirts forever!”

Karin sunk down to the floor, meeting her older sister's shocked expression when she reached the bottom. Yet Hikari appeared to recognize the man's voice, and her face took on an expression Karin had never before seen on anyone – shock, distaste, and unbridled rage. There was barely enough time to roll to the side before Hikari threw open the door, catching Karin's chaser in mid knock.

“Kyo! What is wrong with you? Attempting to barge into the my chambers? Rest assured, the king will hear of this!”
Karin could see a sliver of his profile through the space between the door and its hinge. Kyo's jaw was clenched yet he kept his gaze down, and the air was thick with unfriendly tension. “My pardon, your majesty. I was trying to speak with Shihoin Karin. Kouji mentioned she was in need of a sparring partner.”

The man had to be lying. Kouji hadn't said a word of this...Kyo person to her when they briefed last night, just before he set out with the field marshal. Yet why else would a strange man literally chase her through the palace? Either way, mentioning Kouji sealed the man's fate. Hikari grew pale and still, and it was enough to have Karin scoot backwards so that she was hidden half under Hikari's vanity. Kyo seemed to sense the danger as well, taking a step backwards away from the diminutive queen.

When Hikari responded, it was as if winter had descended upon the palace. “You will have to take that up with my cousin when he returns. As it is, you will leave my sister alone. Good day, Kyo.”

Whether he responded or not was lost when Hikari slammed the door. Her shoulders trembled with rage, and Karin had to fight off a moment of nervousness. Even upon their first meeting, Hikari had not been like this – what could have happened with this Kyo that made her so angry? And what would explain Hikari's tone when he had mentioned Kouji? Before she could give much thought to the matter, Hikari turned to her and her smile defrosted the situation. “Do not worry, sister. I definitely will not let that barbarian distress you further. You are safe here.”

Karin suddenly felt quite foolish for running so desperately, and ultimately for getting Hikari involved. She hadn't truly been in danger, although it had been frightening to suddenly be accosted by a man of his power. Truth be told, there had been a moment where her pulse had raced at the thought of facing off with this man...but then she had remembered the secret she had kept, and how hard it had grown of late to keep holding her other ability back. So she had ran and made a fool of herself, and had been the cause of her sister's anger. Ashamed, she hung her head. “I'm sorry, Hikari. He wasn't really...I mean, it's likely he was telling the truth. I shouldn't have run. I-”

“No, Karin! Do not apologize for that madman. This is not his first transgression, and I will not stand for any more of his...eccentricities. Especially when my own family is targeted.” She knelt down so that she looked the taller woman in the eye, and Karin was surprised to see the insecurity in her gaze, belying the conviction of her words. “I won't let him hurt you. I swear it.”

Karin nodded slowly, dropping her gaze. A chill ran down her spine, and although she could foresee no immediate danger, she was more worried now than she had been while running away from Kyo. Hikari was...acting strangely, and this overlay of desperation only made it more apparent. Yet perhaps she was judging her sister too harshly – even the serene Queen of Heaven could not like everyone, and her overprotectiveness towards her family was not a bad thing. It was probably her own fault anyway, causing her sister to worry like this. With that in mind, she smiled chased the worry from her mind, and smiled brightly up at her sister. “All right, Hikari. But let's forget about him – I haven't been able to see you like this for months!” She leaned forward and impulsively pulled her sister into a hug, momentarily wondering at the tiny bones against her own. When she broke contact all shadows had been chased from her mind – Hikari smiled at her, and there was none of the earlier strangeness within it.

“I know, sister. But Gods willing, the war will be over soon. Then we may spend as much time as we wish!” Hikari rose and offered a hand to Karin, and Karin accepted it gingerly, feeling as if her weight would crush the smaller woman. “I've missed you quite a bit these last few months...but Matsuhiro is hopeful that the war may end soon.” Hikari drew Karin over to the window, where a western style tea set lay waiting for them. Hikari noticed Karin's surprise at seeing the incongruous object, and smiled. “Matsuhiro has very definite plans for Takama ga hara after the war with the
demons are over...westernization is sweeping the mainland, and he wants to surpass even Emperor Meiji’s efforts. He has a clear future in mind for us, Karin. It's all very exciting.”

Karin smiled and nodded, and contributed what little she could. To her, everything traditional was fascinating, and she hoped that when the western world came to Takama ga hara, they would not bring their views on women’s inferiority with them any more than it already had. The girls sat and talked for a long time, catching up and taking refuge in each other. It was then that Karin discovered a new concern – Hikari asked pointedly about the field marshal, and Karin had to steel herself against accidentally revealing anything of her dishonorable attraction to him.

Even meeting his handsome younger brother had done nothing to shake the position he held in her esteem. Besides, Takehiro didn’t trust Souri, and that was enough for her. She was only able to distract her sister from further questions about the field marshal by wondering where he and Kouji could have gone on such short notice. Had there been something worth investigating, just the two of them? Or had he simply selected Kouji to attend him on personal business of his own?

Hikari’s face shuttered, and Karin suddenly regretted changing topics. Yet before she could say anything there was a knock at the door. She turned to look but Hikari merely took a sip of her tea. “Come in, Sakurako.”

The door swung open, and a teenage girl stepped in. Although she was quite beautiful, she curtsied jerkily like a puppet on a string. Only then did she look up and realize the queen had a guest. “Who are...oh. Excuse me.” She curtsied again, just as awkwardly as the first time. When she rose her chin did as well, and her glance became a challenge. “I am Sakurakouji Sakurako. It is my pleasure to meet you.”

Although it was still early, Sakurako knew the day wasn’t going to go well. For one thing, Zed had been more absentminded than usual because the servant girl had winked at him, and training with an absentminded Zed was almost as bad as not training at all. Secondly, Kyo had been gone all morning, haring after the foreigner Kouji had hinted was a challenge. Now she found herself 10 minutes late for her Lady Training, and staring at the same foreigner in question. No wonder Kyo had been in such a bad mood when she had passed him in the hallway - she had taken refuge with her sister, whom everyone knew hated Kyo for no real reason at all. Determined to dislike the woman even before they had been introduced, Sakurako stuck up her chin in defiance and very nearly fell over on her second curtsy.

The queen frowned, but was too well bred to castigate her in front of company. Sakurako wondered if she would send the foreigner away so she could complete her lesson. Then, Kyo could finally get the challenge he was waiting for. On the other hand, perhaps Hikari would be more lenient with her half-sister in attendance. After a moment of fierce indecision, prudence won out and she decided that showing her dislike of the woman was probably not in her best interests.

The foreigner stood, introduced herself and bowed, and the sight of it made Sakurako’s lips twist. Why wasn’t Hikari forcing her to curtsy? She wasn’t even wearing a dress - she was dressed in
casual issue military wear, looking more like a man than half of the king’s attendants. Sakurako was caught between admiration and jealousy, and it didn’t help her assessment of Karin. The woman had all that Sakurako wanted - independence, a position in the army, pants - just by virtue of her foreign birth, and any awkwardness in its application Sakurako would not admit to. So what if rumors ran rife throughout the palace about the unattractive, foreign power user? She was wearing pants! That had to be worth it!

The queen glanced at Sakurako and then nodded toward the tea set, indicating that her Lady Training Lessons were not to be pushed aside. Sakurako bit back her scowl as she focused on the angle of her elbow, not registering that the teapot was suspiciously light until the tea failed to pour.

Sakurako held the pouring position several moments too long, unsure of how to react. What she wanted to do was put the damn thing down and shrug, and announce there was to be no tea this morning. Better yet, she could hurl it against the wall and command them both to lick the shards. Neither option was viable, however, so she hesitated; eyes flicking up to the queen who watched with her regular disapproval.

“A lady always knows when to refill her tea. You must learn to judge by the weight of the pot and act accordingly.”

Sakurako gently set the teapot down, wishing dark vengeance on the queen. She had thought she’d get used to the constant litany of her failures, but to be castigated in front of a stranger? She glanced over at the foreigner, who looked at the teapot with a puzzled expression. Yet before she could glance away they made eye contact, and the foreigner shrugged minutely. Sakurako was then caught between shame and an unexpected sense of camaraderie with the very woman she had decided to dislike. Deciding to deal with neither of her feelings, she rose gracelessly and made her way to the tea table at the back of the sitting room, replete with a warming plate and a kettle of lukewarm water. She dallied there for a few minutes, waiting for the water to heat through and taking deep breaths.

Behind her the sisters continued to speak quietly, and she could just make out the majority of their conversation. It didn’t take long for the queen to mention a name that garnered Sakurako’s attention. “Karin, did...Kouji speak to you before he left?”

“Just to tell me that he and Field Marshal Fujiwara were leaving, and who to report to in case of emergencies. Why?”

“No reason. I just wondered when they might return.”

“I see. I’m not sure. Kouji didn’t mention anything long or difficult, and he said only a few men would travel with them. I suppose it could be just a few days.”

The queen lapsed into silence, presumably nursing her cup of cold tea dregs. Sakurako wondered if she had drank the entire pot by herself, and began toying with the accoutrements on the tea tray. When the queen spoke again, it was to change subjects entirely. “Do you love me?”

Sakurako nearly dropped the sugar scoop. There was a beat of silence before Karin answered, confident yet concerned. “Of course I do! I- Hikari, what is wrong? Why are you-”

Karin cut off abruptly, and Sakurako wished she could turn around and see what was going on. Yet the kettle had not yet whistled and there was no reason she could use to return. She glanced down at her hands, finally noting that the sugar scoop had been polished and was highly reflective. She lifted it and after a moment of adjusting was able to catch a blurred image of the sisters behind her.
What she saw surprised her. The queen was leaning over the table, nearly nose to nose with her sister; hands on either side of Karin’s face to hold her still. The foreigner watched with wide eyes, and body rigid with tension, clearly nervous and ready to bolt. Beyond her initial curiosity, Sakurako wondered if she had lied about loving her older sister, and what would happen were that the case.

After a long moment the queen released her, shoulders heaving with emotion. “I...I am sorry, Karin. I had to know. I couldn’t...couldn’t let it go, otherwise!”

The sugar scoop couldn’t reflect Karin’s expression, but her the waver in her voice did. “I...Hikari, what is wrong? What were you looking for? I couldn’t - you were…” She trailed off, apparently unable to explain the feeling of her sister’s invasive power.

The kettle began its rising whistle and Sakurako hastily palmed the sugar scoop. She cracked her neck in a show of nonchalance, feeling both sisters’ eyes on her. Their conversation ceased immediately, and she couldn’t help but hate the damn tea kettle too. Did it have to boil just when things got interesting?

She gathered up the kettle and began her walk back to the table, but she knew by the time she reached the table that she would have to regulate her thoughts to include none of what she had just witnessed. So she allowed herself to wonder over the strangeness of the scene for just a few minutes, knowing she would reflect more fully on them later. What was it that the queen couldn’t let go of? Why had the queen sounded so apologetic? Had she seen what she was looking for? Most intriguingly, why had the foreigner sounded so frightened?

Sakurako didn’t know, but she definitely wanted to find out.

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Kouji stared out over the unchanging scenery, a forest of bamboo shoots growing well over thirty feet tall. The last few hours had been spent waiting for Fujiwara to return from a meeting with one of his scouts, and Kouji had been left to guard the hastily erected camp. That being said, there had been nothing to guard against - the demons had lain low for the last few weeks, and there had been no sign of any other monster since Takehiro had slain the dragon. His sole form of entertainment had been watching the Fujiwara’s retainers groom the horses, and it was safe to say his morning had been rather dull.

Still, it was better than languishing back at the palace, within Hikari’s reach. The guilt he felt at having abandoned Karin and Takehiro was nothing compared to the relief of freedom. Here there were no kings involving him in royal marital squabbles, and no queens trying to bid for his affections. Although unschooled in the ways of romance, Kouji had no doubt that was the inevitable end of Hikari’s persistent love for him. He had to make a plan, yet he had no idea where to start: staying in Japan would require an unlikely change in Hikari’s feelings, yet leaving before the war was definitively over was just as impossible. It had been hard enough to gain permission to travel out of Takama ga hara the first time, and now that he had been hailed a hero, leaving would be next to impossible. Buying time by travelling with Hideyoshi was the only thing he could think
of doing, but they would return within a few days. By the Four Winds, how was he going to handle this without shaming himself, Hikari, or the Shihoin name?

Worse yet, how would the king react when he learned his wife loved another? Although Matsuhiro was a good man and a stable ruler, he had already demonstrated some deviances from the norm when it came to his young wife - the question of outing Kyo as his heir, for instance. Would he react as many other jealous men might, and challenge him? Or would he stop at exile? That in itself might be preferable, but what if the punishment fell onto Hikari? Although he did not understand her feelings, and thought her weak for still entertaining them, he did not want her to come to harm. No, the most plausible solution was to remove himself from the equation. Yet how was he to go about that?

One of Fujiwara’s retainers walked to him and interrupted his fruitless planning. “Lord Shihoin, the field marshal has returned and wishes to speak with you. If you are ready…?”

Kouji nodded his assent and fell in behind him. Perhaps he could vie for an ambassadorial position? While he was at it, he should ask Fujiwara for Takehiro as an assistant. From what little his friend had divulged he’d had a hard life growing up in Takama ga hara as a rare kind...perhaps he would be less encumbered outside its confines?

Fujiwara leaned over a cot, staring down at papers stacked in neat lines across it. Even in these conditions the man was meticulous and organized, and it was something Kouji respected. “You called? How did the briefing go?”

Fujiwara turned and flashed a distracted smile. “It went well. Nothing new was established - the demons have vanished, and there have been no sign of dragons, either. Some hope they are gone for good, but most of the scouts are not so sanguine. Still, we have uncovered as much as we can for the moment. We will be heading back tomorrow morning, if there is nothing further you would attend to?”

Kouji’s expression must have indicated his lack of desire to return, as it made the field marshal set down a stack of paper and look at him more closely. “There is something, then? We can take a day or two more...or if it will take longer than that, I can leave a few of my men with you.” He bit the inside of his cheek. “I have...matters to attend to back at the palace, and if it is all the same to you, I’d like to return as soon as possible.”

Kouji nodded slowly. It had been apparent from the start that Fujiwara had not wanted to be away from the palace, especially with his wife so close to her due date. Although his wife had safe deliveries twice prior - and the first a set of twins - it was understandable that Fujiwara was nervous. Even were that not the case Kouji had come to realize how openly the field marshal respected his family and doted on his children. It was not simply a matter of refusing the carnal company of all other women, as Karin and Takehiro had told him of their encounter with Madame Tsuki and her charges. He was a man who put his family first above all else save his duty to the kingdom. It was no wonder that he was in a hurry to return to the palace, and Kouji felt like a cad for delaying him. Still, he could not return until he had a plan! “Then return as soon as you’d like! And don’t worry about me. I am certainly capable of undertaking an errand or two on my own.”

“In any other time I’d agree, but now is not the best time for any of us to go haring off alone. What if you ran into another dragon? Takehiro isn’t here to help this time.”

Kouji glared at the field marshal. He knew that Fujiwara would recognize Takehiro’s sword, and would figure out what had actually happened. There had been no point hiding the fact from the field marshal, especially if it fed into his present difficulties. Yet the field marshal was returning his glare with a gaze that could bend steel, and Kouji found himself stammering for a reply. “I-
well—yes, but we’re not looking for one now… I mean—” Realizing that he was in the presence of an eminently trustworthy man who had already been of some help to him, Kouji gave up. “I can’t go back yet. For personal reasons.”

Fujiwara raised an arched eyebrow. “Is that what this is about? I had wondered why you were so adamant to join me. Are you avoiding something in particular?”

Kouji grimaced and ran a hand through his unbound hair. Braiding had become a nuisance as of late, and he had taken to tying it back in a club, like the Zed boy did. “You could say that.”

Deciding that he may as well see if Fujiwara could assist him further, he continued. “Returning now might be problematic and would distress more than just myself. Is there anything you could assign me that would keep me away from the palace?”

“Perhaps. Is this distress of yours more than any concern you might feel for Karin? You’d be leaving her alone in the palace, among a large number of nobles who take great offense to her being there.”

Kouji blinked. Now that he mentioned it, he had left her behind with barely a word of explanation. But he was sure she would be careful to mask her other ability, and as long as she didn’t run into Kyo - who was rarely there in the first place - she would be fine. Hikari would shield her from any political enemies or other social mishaps. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. Hikari can look after her. And if anything else happens, she has Takehiro.”

“…If you say so. But I suppose you’re unwilling to disclose with me the nature of your distress? If so, I will assume it has to do with your recent briefing with the queen about the matter of the heir.”

Oh, how he wished he could say it was simply that. “That is one part of it. The rest… is much more complicated. Perhaps it is best to say that the true reason I stay away is a matter of honor.”

Fujiwara’s eyes fell, and his immediate rejoinder was cut off. Kouji hoped that his delicate phrasing might hint at another entanglement, and implicate anyone other than the queen. ‘A matter of honor’ was the courtly way of saying ‘a matter of the heart,’ and from Kouji’s dismissive expression it was obvious that Kouji’s heart was not the one wounded. “I see. You have made yourself clear to the lady involved?”

“I have.”

“And you still fear repercussions?”

He had to tread very carefully here, and tell a few politic lies. “She’s merely a star-struck girl, with no real concept of what her foolish affections entail. I respect her husband, however, and would not see him inconvenienced. Therefore I think it is best to stay away for a time, at least until we have definite news on the demon incursions.”

“Foolish affections…” Fujiwara mused, eyes cast down and attention focused inwards. “I suppose they would seem so, to you. They must be nothing more than a nuisance when not directed towards the proper partner. It would be better for her to have never harbored them at all, wouldn’t it?”

Kouji opened his mouth to agree, yet Fujiwara’s introspection took him by surprise. To hear the stern field marshal speak so empathetically towards the lovelorn seemed ill-fitting, until Kouji remembered that Fujiwara’s most widely acclaimed poems were those of love. Still, Kouji couldn’t help but consider his own situation, and be practical. “In my situation, yes. In others…” The answer was still yes, as honor must be upheld before all. Yet he wasn’t sure how to say it when faced with Fujiwara’s torn expression.
“I see your reasoning. To you, there can be no love without honor. Yet have you ever loved? Loved without hope; without potential for fruition? I doubt your young lady loves you that deeply but such a love exists, and not just in old poems and tales. Men and women who uphold their honor in every other way suffer from this unwanted affection. Does that make them less than what they should be?”

There was nothing that he could say. He, who had never been in love, never wanted to be, never felt the slightest inclination towards anyone. The field marshal spoke with such feeling and conviction that it was almost impossible to do anything but absorb the force of his argument. As it was, he barely managed to slowly shake his head.

Fujiwara continued on, eyes flashing with uncharacteristic emotion. “And do you think they don’t fight it? Everyday they fight it, reminding themselves of their honor, their upbringing, their duty. Yet still it washes over them like the waves of an inexorable ocean. All it takes is one smile, one glance, and they are lost. You have no idea, Kouji. You have no idea how terrible and wonderful love can be.”

Kouji said nothing, mind reeling from the implications of Fujiwara’s outburst. At the core of his confusion was this: were these the feelings of Fujiwara the poet...or Fujiwara the man?

“You imply that there is no honor in this kind of love. Yet there can be, if it is a silent, self-sacrificing love that doesn’t interfere with their lives or your duties. Such a thing can exist, and I believe should not be looked down upon. As long as it remains just that.”

The question pushed itself past his lips before he could consider the propriety of it. “You bear this kind of love for someone?”

Fujiwara looked away, and for a long moment Kouji thought he would not answer. He finally did in clipped tones, “And do you judge me a lesser man for it?”

“No.” No matter what else Kouji thought, his respect for the field marshal had not changed. “But what of your wife?”

“I care for and respect her very deeply. She and our children will always be my priority.”

Kouji had never thought to find the slightest connection between his cousin and the field marshal. Now that he had found it, his mind boggled, and he was stuck asking simple yet painful questions. “And you cannot stop...feeling this way?”

Fujiwara shook his head, helplessly. “If I could, I would. As it is, I may love her for all the days of my life.”

“What can I do? I won’t tell her, if that is what you are asking. But I think...I will write a poem. It will be for her. In it I will write all my feelings, all my helplessness, all my love for her. And that will be the end. That will be all I will allow myself. Beyond that, I will simply take each day as it comes, and pray that she finds happiness.”

He knew it was folly to linger, and after promising to keep Fujiwara’s secret, he turned to go. Yet he had one last question to ask. “You said you would pray for her happiness. If she finds it with someone else, can you truly be happy for her?”

Fujiwara shut his eyes and bowed his head. Kouji felt some guilt for causing the man pain, but if
his answer could be used to help Kouji’s own situation, he needed it hear it. “I think so, yes. I want
her to be happy, and know I cannot make her so. But there is a good amount of pain in fearing that
I may someday be called upon to act as the instrument of her future happiness. Even though I want
her to smile...the thought of her with another does pain me.”

“But not enough for you to change? Either to stop loving her, or…?”

“There is no alternative. My family comes before my feelings, always.”

There was nothing else he could say. Kouji left the tent feeling more unsettled than when he had
entered it. That a man such as the field marshal could be laid low by love did some good however,
in that it caused him to consider Hikari in more friendly terms. He no longer thought her weak, at
the very least. Yet the strength of Fujiwara’s forbidden attachment impressed on him the urgency
of staying away even more. He could not return. Not until he solved this problem, one way or
another.

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Karin hadn’t taken ten steps upon leaving Hikari’s chambers before she had come to two
realizations. One, that she needed to find and speak to Takehiro as soon as possible. Hikari had
come within a hair’s breath of discovering not only the existence of rare kinds, but her involvement
with them, and even Takehiro’s name. She had to warn him. Secondly, she needed to enact a plan
to protect herself - Hikari had come far too close to discovering her own secret as well. In fact, if
her sister hadn’t been so hellbent on ferreting out information about Kouji, there was quite a few
secrets that could have been revealed. It was only now that Karin understood how precarious her
position was, and how dangerous it could be for Takehiro to trust her. Although Hikari had seemed
truly apologetic - and it had been impossible to discuss what had happened with Sakurako there -
there was no saying it couldn’t happen again. And if it did...all was lost.

Karin was so deep in thought that even with both of her abilities, she didn’t notice the man in front
of her until she walked directly into him. She stammered out her apologies and bowed immediately,
so that she did not know who it was she had jostled until she raised her head. “Oh! I’m so sorry,
I…” She trailed off, eyes widening in horror.

A wide, satisfied smile spread over Kyo’s mouth. “Finally found you.” He leaned in close, and
Karin could practically feel the flames of hell licking at her body. “Ready to play?”

In her panic, there was only one thing she could think of doing. She punched him in the stomach
and then ran like hell, praying to all the gods that she could reach one of Takehiro’s hiding places
in time. Otherwise...otherwise…!

Her day ended as it began: being chased by the tentative heir of the realm, and in utter fear for her
life.
Next chapter teaser: Takehiro is a sneaky man, Karin makes a dangerous decision, and someone *powerful* gets suckerpunched in the face.
Within the Walls

Chapter Summary

In which political men spell trouble, and sleeping tigers are baited.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

1898

There were disadvantages to working for the third most politically powerful man in the kingdom. Takehiro always had an appreciation for Hideyoshi in terms of his personal safety, but he had discovered that remaining unnoticed in a palace full of nobles, warriors, and bureaucrats was next to impossible. This was especially true when Hideyoshi had told him to keep an eye on certain people, and those people included half a dozen political rivals - underdeveloped nobleman who weren’t a threat as of yet, but could represent such in the future; Karin - who had caught the eye of the king’s son yesterday and had been on the run ever since, and Souri, whom Hideyoshi had assigned as the target of greatest importance. Understandably, it was the last that was giving him the most trouble. The nobleman were boring and Karin ran quite fast, but the younger Fujiwara had an agenda, and now that his brother was away he lost no time in enacting it. He had met with almost all the other watched nobleman, plying them with smiles, nods, and political maneuvers until Takehiro’s head spun, and he no longer recognized the Japanese they were speaking. Then had moved in on the ladies, and he had seen just how easily Souri had risen through the ranks of power users, despite being ungifted himself. He charmed the wives of the important men - never to the point of impropriety - yet enough to garner their goodwill. Coupled with the network of men in his pocket, family name, and personal intelligence, he was easily the most networked man in the kingdom. It was no wonder that his name had been offered up as a candidate for the only open position in the king’s cabinet - liaison to non-power users.

As a non-power user himself it was the only position he could ascend to. Still, Hideyoshi had not trusted his means of reaching it, and from the seriousness of the request Takehiro could only assume he was a strong candidate. So he watched him, lurking in the shadows and making his way through the series of hiding places that Hideyoshi had supplied him with.

From watching him, Takehiro learned Souri was a careful man - never outright promising anything, yet always implying exactly what the listener wanted most to hear. Takehiro’s suspicions that had formed the night of the ball cemented. The man was ambitious, charming, and cunning, yet resilient as well. This was an exceedingly dangerous combination, and there was nothing to stop him on his ascent to power. That his own brother did not openly support him bothered Souri not a whit, and although he made no claims in his brother’s name - something Takehiro listened very carefully for - the assumption that the Fujiwaras were a family undivided was a key point in his docket. It didn’t take long for Takehiro to hear enough. The matter was simple: the man wanted the liaison position, and unless something drastic occurred, he was going to get it.
Although he had more than heard enough, Takehiro followed Souri one last time, the night before Hideyoshi was expected to return. This time, the man wasn’t making housecalls - it was a meeting on his own turf, and with someone Takehiro had not expected. Heike Masaomi had made waves with his recent appointment as second-in-command of the king’s Special Forces at only 15 years of age. Although he had not conversed with the man, he had felt an interest in the man, hoping him to be of the same moral character as Kouji and Red. Yet judging by the proud set of his shoulders as he knocked on Souri’s door, he was the ambassador’s man, through and through.

He had to wait until Heike had gone inside before he could activate the hidden passageway connecting Hideyoshi’s chambers to Souri’s. From there, he could hide between the walls and listen in on what he hoped might be something salacious and new. He was not disappointed.

By the time he got into position, Souri was well into the familiar litany of his political platform. Across from him, Heike sat and listened with eager attention. None of this was new, so Takehiro let his mind wander through the ambassador’s half-promises and almost-lies until with his usual dramatic flair, Souri announced the words “rare kinds.”

*That* got Takehiro’s attention.

“Through my research I have discovered influxes of rare kind births that spike on the heels of the great disasters that have befallen Takama ga hara: when the southern plains caught fire nearly 1000 years ago; the tsunami to the north 200 years ago, and the plague that decimated the palace 600 years ago. Although the current disaster puts all others to shame, there is no doubt in my mind that rare kinds will soon be on the rise. It is the final and most important part of my platform - and when I bring my findings to the king, I expect nothing less than to be put in a position where I will be able to *do* something about it.”

Heike nodded excitedly, looking younger when a grin broke across his impassive facade. “Of course! And if there is anyone who can find a way to integrate our old enemies it would be you! You’ve already shown the king the worth of the non-power user; to show him the uses of the rare kind would be an incredible triumph!”

Souri hesitated for the barest of moments, and nothing but that brief pause gave him away. Heike’s expectant expression did not change, but Takehiro saw what he did not. Souri had not meant to assimilate the rare kinds, no matter what Heike had thought. No doubt Souri meant to exterminate them, although how he could do so as a non-power user was beyond Takehiro. Yet Heike had somehow gotten it in his head that Souri would do just the opposite. Takehiro held his breath, wondering how Souri would proceed. Would he demolish Heike’s idea, and potentially shake his trust? Or would he play along?

“It is a difficult road to walk, my friend. And it will ultimately depend on those who hold the power...no matter how outdated their reasonings may seem. But of all people, you know my mind and purpose the best. Can I rely on you, Masaomi? Will you be my right hand as I work to usher in a new age of fairness and prosperity for *all* the people of Takama ga hara, not simply the gifted ones?”

Heike trembled with emotion, and for a brief moment pure, eye-scorching light shone forth. Takehiro blinked away the spots of light from his vision, relieved to see that the light adept had regained control of himself. “Always. Forever. My life is yours, Lord Fujiwara.”

Souri nodded, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully as if contemplating the rules of a game he had just begun to play. “Then I shall put my faith in you. Continue doing the work the king has assigned to you - for now, your mission is to impress the royal family. Our first priority is to defeat the demons, after all. That will not change. Yet as we do so, stay alert for my instructions. The winds
of change are upon us, Masaomi. We must be ready to react at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, sir.” Recognizing that he’d been dismissed, Heike stood and bowed deeply. Yet before he turned to go, he hesitated. “Sir, if I may - while clearing out a village to the south I met a young man whose power was incredible. I know you’ve asked me not to move without your direction, but I couldn’t let such an opportunity pass me by. I asked him to join me, and eventually he agreed. I took him on as my personal assistant, so as to not appoint someone without the king’s or your permission.” Heike breathed deeply, and for the first time looked nervous. “Please tell me I have not overstepped my bounds. I only did so out of honest admiration for his power...and knowing that he can be an irreplaceable asset to us.”

Souri smiled indulgently in the face of his subordinate’s trepidation. “I trust your judgement, Masaomi. If you believe him an asset, than an asset he will be. And his name is…?”

Heike hesitated. “He has thrown away his previous name and life since the death of his family. He goes by the name Yukihina, which is fitting as his power is over ice and snow.”

“And was he a nobleman, or a commoner?”

“Although he claims no exalted heritage, he bears himself nobly, and has in-depth knowledge of the ceremonies and rituals that I...I do not. If I had to guess I would say he is a lesser son of a nobleman. Yet his skin is much darker than any I have seen...perhaps an illegitimate offspring?” Heike smiled softly, and from his position Takehiro could see the loneliness in his expression. “He is my age. Perhaps with time he will trust me, and open up to me about his past. I would...like that very much.”

Souri held his smile, but there was something uneasy in his posture. Had Takehiro not spent the last several days hounding his every step, he would have missed it. Perhaps the ambassador had a better idea of whom this ‘Yukihina’ might be? Or perhaps he was worried about outside influences over his disciple? Regardless, there was nothing he could say, not when Heike was this excited about his new friend. “I will look into the matter of his heritage, if you would like. Otherwise, I shall leave him in your capable hands.”

Heike smiled brilliantly, and it made Takehiro squint as if he had used his light power. “Thank you, Lord Fujiwara. He won’t let you down.”

“I know that he will not. But don’t you have a briefing within the half hour? You must show the king that while young, you are still punctual. Make me proud, Masaomi.”

Souri was a master, Takehiro decided, as he watched the older man stare thoughtfully at the door his subordinate had just exited through. Heike had managed to throw a wrench into his plans, yet he had recovered instantly, with no trace of being thrown in the first place.

“Offering clemency to rare kinds? An interesting idea...”

Takehiro was so shocked that Souri would utter something so provocative aloud that he nearly banged his head against the wall. It had been surprising enough for Heike to offer up such an idea, expecting Souri to feel the same sympathy towards them. That the ambassador was only now musing over the idea proved that he’d meant to exterminate them earlier, and Takehiro wondered how such a miscommunication could arise. Still, it wasn’t as important as whatever might follow. Souri’s research was clearly incomplete, and unless his lies extended much further than Takehiro suspected, he didn’t know the existence of the Enclave. But if he decided to integrate rare kinds, and convinced the King to not hunt them down on sight...
No. His people would still be feared and dehumanized, treated like slaves or half-citizens. There was no real safety in their current world, and even if there would be, Takehiro doubted that this snake would be the harbinger of the rare kind’s salvation.

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Enough was enough. On sundown of the third day Karin had been stalked throughout the palace, her control snapped like a taut rope and she stood her ground, not caring that they were in the middle of the kitchen and in full view of half the palace’s cooks. Steam billowed around them and the air rang with the cacophony of pots, pans, and the hiss of oil spilling onto the stove tops. Karin cared not at all, clenching her fists as she stared down the heir to the realm. “What the hell is your problem? I don’t care what Kouji told you! He told me not to fight anyone unless he was there. So back off, buddy! I’m done with your bullshit!”

Kyo smiled his signature, predatory smile. “You have no idea who you’re talking to, do you?”

Karin was far too angry to be politic. “Oh, I have a good idea: an overgrown bully. Like to stalk women for fun? Or you just have a taste for foreign flesh?” Had Takehiro been there, he would have had a heart attack. As it was, she experienced palpitations of her own, yet her rage was all-consuming.

“My honor’s wounded, Shihoin. I demand satisfaction and all that. Let’s go.”

Catching the astonished glances of several cooks, Karin stuck up her chin. “Nope. Now leave me alone.” She turned on her heel yet his grip on her bicep stopped her. “Let me go.”

“No honor among foreigners, huh? What a surprise.”

Karin wrenched her arm out of his grip. “You forget I’m half Japanese. Perhaps you are blaming the wrong half of my heritage.”

There was suddenly a sheet of hellflame at her back, cutting off her escape route. Kyo leaned in close, a dangerous gleam in his eye. “Listen well, girlie. I don’t give a damn about dishonor, and I don’t give a damn about what your cousin wants. I won’t tell anybody about your other ability, so don’t get your panties in a knot. Just fight me. I’m bored.”

He was bluffing. He had to be. Kouji wouldn’t have kept her secret for the last eight years simply to tell this madman. And even though she did not totally trust or share Hikari’s hatred for this man, she knew her best chance of staying safe was to not fight him at all. So, after looking down at the floor in a show of indecision, Karin opened her mouth as if to give him her response.

She exhaled with the force of a mighty gale of wind, turning her head at the last moment so that she propelled herself over the adjacent countertops rather than into the flame. The suddenness of her maneuver took even Kyo by surprise, and she took the advantage to race out of the kitchen, pulling on the wind to spur her speed. Behind her, she heard Kyo resume his chase and several voices that rose in alarm. Panic and thrill whirled within her, until she was gasping with a mixture of fear and excitement. This man was terrifyingly powerful - her combat and wind abilities would be nowhere
near enough to defeat him. Even were she to use her blood manipulation, it would probably not be enough. But probably was not certainty, and the the thought of solo victory - her first since she came to this country - caused excitement to spike through her. Yet she couldn’t possibly use it. It would get her exiled at the least, if not killed-

“Shihoin!”

Clearly this couldn’t continue forever. She could take refuge with the field marshal when he returned, but Kyo would always be here, waiting for her to slip. She needed to figure out a surefire way to deter him, but first she needed to get away. Rounding a corner at top speed, she didn’t notice Takehiro until she slammed into him, sending them both to the floor.

“Gods on fire, Red, what the hell are you-”

“Not now run run run!”

They were too late. Kyo slowed to a walk as he approached them. “Got you. Nowhere left to run, girlie-”

Behind her, Takehiro’s mouth dropped and his eyes widened. Karin sucked in a breath as she set her shoulders, trying to hide her friend. Without turning to face Kyo, she whispered out of the side of her mouth, “Go. I’ll hold him off.” She kicked herself to her feet, spinning in midair during her elongated descent. She ducked defensively, yet before Kyo could react Takehiro settled in next to her.

“We’ve got a better chance of losing him together. Be careful, Red.”

“I know!”

Kyo cracked his neck as he eyed his new opponent. “Two for one, huh? Guess it really is my lucky day. Well then-” He charged at them, each fist encased in bright blue flame. It didn’t matter that they were in the hallway of the king’s palace, nor that it would be laughably easy for the wood and paper of the shoji doors to catch flame. For Karin, there was only the dual regret and excitement of giving in, and the stretch and force of her body. There was heat in the air, so hot it threatened to burn the winds she commanded. Yet what burned the air would not burn her - she was faster than Kouji, faster even than Takehiro when she needed to be - and she flowed like water around Kyo; twisting and avoiding every blow so that he swore in annoyance. The pounding in her heart was spreading to her head, and within mere moments there was no more room for rational thought. There was only her body and he who would harm it, and it was in this halfway stage of incredible focus that Karin forgot to fear, and landed a direct hit on the side of Kyo’s face.

Takehiro - whom Karin had nearly forgotten the existence of in her battle daze - followed up with two sharp jabs at the back of Kyo’s legs, and in the next moment the heir was brought to his knees. A grin flashed across her friend’s face, yet he had underestimated his opponent. Kyo lunged out with lightning quickness, grabbing the back of Takehiro’s shirt and pulling him back towards him. His other hand he raised, sheathed in hellflame.

Karin’s perception of time slowed to a halt, and her cry caught in her lips. Takehiro couldn’t break free, and there was no time or way to block or deflect the flame...and even though it wouldn’t kill him, it would undoubtedly give him away! In that panicked moment, Karin made the unconscious choice to save her friend, even if it meant her own life. Desperation made it possible to overpower her limiter’s influence, and she stretched out her awareness to the blood within Kyo’s hand.

The moment before Takehiro came into contact with the hellflame all three players froze in a grim
tableau. Takehiro cringed, eyes shut tightly. Karin clenched her fist, entire body humming with the expense of her power. Yet Kyo’s arm was held by an invisible force, blood mottling underneath the skin. All he could do was stare in consternation at the hand that would not follow his command and stretch that last half an inch towards his enemy.

Karin trembled with exertion, every ounce of concentration on the blood in Kyo’s hand. She had done what she had hypothesized with Takehiro - taken control over the blood in his body and bent it under her will. Yet his power was staggering, and she had never had a chance to execute this procedure. She suspected she wouldn’t be able to hold it much longer; she had to do something before her hold failed. “Let go of him….or I’ll move it to your mouth. Can’t win if you can’t breathe.”

Takehiro fixed her with wide, panicked eyes, and she could practically hear his litany of recriminations in her head. Yet Kyo continued to glance back and forth between her and his hand. Sweat beaded at her brow, and she began to tremble. Yet she would not let go. She would not let her friend die!

Finally, Kyo spoke. “How are you doing this?”

Panic flashed across her mind before she remembered Kouji’s favorite technique. “Aerial wall. Don’t test me. Let him go.”

Kyo held him for a moment longer, staring down her weakness. Yet just as she felt her control begin to slip, he put out his flame and released Takehiro. He took a step towards her, not paying any mind to the man he assumed would slump to the floor. Yet before Kyo could recall his power, Takehiro reared back and aimed for his face, suckerpunching him as hard as he could.

Karin’s mouth dropped as Kyo staggered backwards. The next thing she knew, Takehiro had gripped her around her waist and was hauling her backwards, muttering admonishments in her ear. “Are you simple? Motherfucking go already!” It was all Karin needed. Stumbling, she turned so that she and Takehiro could run unimpeded down the hallway, following his lead when he tugged her to the left. Behind them, Kyo got over his shock with a massive roar that shook the doors to either side of them.

“I hate you so much and why is that man chasing us and what the fuck did you even do Shihoin Karin?!” Takehiro muttered to himself as they tore through the palace, and if they hadn’t been running for their lives Karin would have laughed out loud. The situation was dire, and after three days of running her endurance was low. Yet they were alive, and they had fought together, and although he could complain like an old woman sometimes she knew without question that Takehiro would always have her back.

“Explain it…later. We’ve got to hide…first.”

He tugged her left again, and before she could regain her bearings he pulled her to a stop, heaving aside what appeared to be solid wood. Once open, he shoved her inside, following closely after. The secret compartment closed mere moments before Kyo turned onto the hallway.

Karin froze in the dark, terrified now that she was trapped. There was barely an inch of space between her and the walls, and Takehiro’s grip anchored her in place. Her heart was beating so loudly she was sure Kyo could hear, yet Takehiro’s hand over her mouth ensured her breathing was quiet at least.

The walls partially muffled Kyo’s voice, but he still sounded close by. “Shihoin! Don’t be a coward! Come out and fight!”
Shhhhh.” Takehiro’s warning was more an exhalation of air against her ear, but he needn’t have bothered. If Kyo hadn’t seen them duck into the secret tunnel, she certainly wasn’t going to give them away.

“Your cousin’s going to be so ashamed of you. Did he teach you to run from battle?”

Deep breaths, in and out. She could do this, she really could. It had already been several minutes, and he hadn’t found the secret door. Maybe he didn’t know it existed? Hikari had claimed he wasn’t (very) welcome at the palace, so surely he couldn’t have spent enough time here to discover all the palace’s secrets, could he?

Kyo’s voice now sounded far away, as if he had made his way down to the far end of the hallway. “And if this is about that special power of yours-”

“Lord Kyo? Pardon an old woman’s intrusion, but who are you talking to?”

Takehiro sagged against her, and it took Karin a long moment to realize his body was trembling with suppressed laughter. Kyo had been interrupted by the Head Launderer, an ancient, venerable woman who had claimed her days as a lowly palace washerwoman began when Matsuhiro’s grandfather had reigned. Now resembling a tiny, wrinkled raisin, she was well known around the palace for the quality of her linens and the silence of her steps. She was also infamous for the tone of voice that made one feel unutterably silly.

“I-...no one, Madame Launderer. I did not mean to disturb you.”

Apparently, her ability to cow the young people of the palace extended even to Kyo. Karin could just imagine her arched eyebrow and her deceptively gentle expression. “Quite all right, dear. But you do look rather peaky - perhaps a good nap is in order? Yes, it seems just the thing. A man in your position needs to tend to his health!”

Kyo’s reluctance was obvious, yet their voices grew quieter with every passing moment. Karin liked to think that the diminutive woman was physically steering him away. “I’m perfectly fine, Madame-”

“Nonsense, dear! Just look at that nasty welt on your face! Don’t worry, I’ll go and give whoever did that a piece of my mind…”

Karin and Takehiro held in their giggles as the echo of their voices faded, unable to look at each other for fear of laughing and giving themselves away. Yet as the moment stretched into silence, the gravity of their situation struck them. After assuring Karin that he was all right, he turned and smiled ruefully. “You controlled his blood, didn’t you?”

“-I panicked! I couldn’t let him expose you-”

“And then I suckerpunched him, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but-”

“We are in such deep shit.”

Karin sighed. “Yeah.”

“Hideyoshi is going to kill me. Mind if we just spend the rest of our lives here?”

Karin imagined the look on her cousin’s face when she told him what happened, and the look on Fujiwara’s when they gave the abridged version. She shivered. “I’m not leaving.” And then, a
moment later: “Thank you.”

Takehiro smirked at her, and answered in a parody of their first fight. “For what?”

“For *always* being incredibly annoying.”

“...Ha. Anytime, Red.”

Chapter End Notes

Due to a barrage of RL reasons and then general laziness, this chapter took two weeks to write. Kicking myself, but am so glad it is finally done! Bah. On another note, has anyone *actually* looked at the photobucket album? Is that a thing? Well I like it, so there :P

…

Next chapter teaser: How to be bros: Toki just wants to talk it all out, while Ogami just wants to close his eyes; Yuuki, to their dismay, just wants to cuddle with Sakura.
Acts of Kindness

Chapter Summary

In which Toki meddles and Ogami blows a fuse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2018

After the story and the training, the Code:Breakers were left with an uncomfortable amount of time in which there was nothing to do. Rui and Sakura had taken to preparing the meals, hindered by Shibuya and Karin’s antics. On the off chance they weren’t teasing the girls in the kitchen they would be conferring with Kouji, drafting battle plans and lapsing into vague, unspecified reminiscences that largely seemed to deal with Shibuya’s unorthodox parenting techniques or Karin’s inability to learn English. A clear-sighted observer would notice that the rambunctious two were trying to raise the spirits of the solemn one, and that it was odd to see Kouji so moody when he was normally so even-tempered.

Rei noticed all this largely as he was in the middle of a pity triangle of his own. Toki and Yuuki had taken it upon themselves to band together, go forth, and, as Toki stubbornly insisted on calling it, “bro-venture.” Subsequently, Rei spent the majority of these occasions looking for a weapon to sheathe within his brain. Still, the boys were nothing if not persistent, and he found himself hounded as once only Sakura could do.

It would be slightly more bearable if Toki and Yuuki were friendly to each other, as Karin and Shibuya seemed to be. The boys had grown exponentially closer since the fall of Eden, acting more as brothers than ever before. Yet just as blood siblings did, the boys bickered, and Rei - and his nerves - soon reached their limit.

“If you take one more drink, I swear to god-”

“Just ‘cuz you can’t handle your alcohol-”

“I will encase you in metal-”

“No wonder you’re such a cheap lay-”

“And not let you out-”

“Don’t make me angry-!”

“Until next week, so help me-”

A sheet of blue flame rose up between them, forcing them to scuttle backwards to avoid singed eyebrows. In perfect sync they turned and frowned at Rei. As quickly as they descended into argument they turned their sights onto a new target, and Rei soon found himself flanked.
“Now, now, Ogami - don’t be so jumpy…”

“Yeah, Sixth. Your tolerance is really low. You should look into that.”

Toki shot a quelling glance at Yuuki before slinging an arm around the premier Code:Breaker. “So things have been a bit rough, lately. You know you can always talk to us, yeah? No matter what happens with...particular female rare kinds, we’ll always have your back. As we are bros. The best bros.”

Rei fleetingly wondered what Toki’s ridiculous obsession with the ‘bro’ concept was all about. Then he engulfed his body in hellflame, causing Toki to squawk and stagger backwards before the fire caught hold.

Yuuki yawned, completely unmoved by the senseless violence. “Told you bringing her up was a bad idea.”

Toki glowered at him. It was certainly safer than glaring at Ogami. “Shut up. I don’t see you trying anything!”

Rei withdrew his flame and thought longingly of the Siberian Tundra. He had only visited it once, but the utter isolation had charmed him and he remembered it ever afterwards as the most peaceful mission of his life. “Neither of you needs to try anything. I’m fine. I don’t need your company, or your pity, and certainly not this...bro business. That being said, I’ll see you both in the morning. Good night.”

He had gotten precisely five steps (in which Toki and Yuuki exchanged telling glances behind his back, he was sure of it) before Yuuki piped up. “Well in that case, I’m going to go snuggle with Nyanmaru. She’s been looking a bit lonely lately. I think she needs some cheering up.”

Rei had just enough time and awareness to catch Toki’s ragged inhal before he spun, caught Yuuki by the shoulders, and hoisted him halfway up the wall. It was a testament to his rage that he was able to do so, as Yuuki’s muscle mass rendered him far heavier than he looked.

“You’re don’t own her, Sixth. Far as I recall, you gave her up. That means she’s fair game. Get over it.”

At this point Toki was nearly beside himself. “Yuuki! What is wrong with you? He’s going to kill you, just watch and see if he doesn’t. You don’t fuck around with-”

Sensing the opportunity for bloodshed, Rei’s lips curved in a dangerous smile. “Huh. Didn’t you hear what I just said? Your ability must be weaker than I thought. Guess I’ll have to beat it into you-”

“Enough!” Toki’s arms punched out to either side, catching on the metal in their clothing and jerking them away from each other. Once separated he pulled several thick, metal pins from his pocket that he elongated with one hand. Then, he shot them towards his friends, forming impromptu shackles to fasten them to the wall. It wouldn’t hold for long, but long enough for him to have his say.

He took a deep breath and began, crossing his arms and striving for a nonchalant tone. “I’m done with this, I really am. It’s bad enough seeing my old man again through the Story That Will Not
Just End, Already. It’s worse seeing Kouji and Rui’s ineffective mating rituals. But this is the final straw. Yuuki - stand down. You are not gonna get a piece of Sakura; give up and go home before Ogami or Shibuya or both take the ambition out of your hide. And Ogami- don’t kill me, but seeing you mope around like a lovesick teenager is a step beyond mild discomfort, it’s an early sign of the apocalypse. Yes, yes, we all know you and Sakura are just as in love with each other as you were six years ago- and this time you’re both aware of it. We also all know that it sucks, and is why you both are runners up for the Least Friendly Person In The Mansion Award. What you need to know is that we are sick of it, and would at the least require notice before you guys start smouldering at each other again. Else I am prepared to hit you, and I shall do so very, very hard.”

Rei went very quiet and still, and humiliation and rage took turns washing over him in waves. He hadn’t realized his unconquerable feelings for Sakura had been so obvious, nor that they had affected anyone other than her. This was exactly what he had wished to avoid - nothing good came out of them interacting, even in terms of their friends’ comfort!

“While I have the chance, I’d also like to ask something that’s been bothering me for a very long time. Pretty much for the last six years. Why, exactly, can’t the two of you be together?”

Seething anger made the answer difficult to push past his lips. “Are you an idiot? The same reason that sparked December 32nd - the negation caused by our blood. Or had you forgotten what happens when the blood of a rare kind and a power user come together? Asshole.”

“Offense taken, Ogami. I’m eating your breakfast sausage tomorrow in retaliation. But here’s some additional food for thought: how often does that whole blood combo actually happen? For how many centuries did rare kinds and power users not know about the negation? Seems to me like there’d have to be some pretty extenuating circumstances for the opportunity to negate to come about. Personally, I’d just blame my father. Everything else is his fault, anyway. And here’s the good news - he’s dead! Chances of negation occurring are automatically lowered by about 80%.”

Rei stopped outwardly struggling so that he could surreptitiously burn through the shackles. Across from him Yuuki was still, content with watching him squirm. “It doesn’t matter how rarely it occurs. Accidents happen, and once is enough. The devastation would be terrible, and something that neither of us could afford. It is selfish and futile to entertain thoughts of being together. It’s not going to happen, and we are never having this conversation again.” There. The shackles melted away, leaving his wrists free and him free to wreak vengeance on Toki’s person. Where did he get off, thinking he could play relationship counselor with him? About her? The thought made his head spin.

With a flick of his wrist Toki released Yuuki as well. “Ok, Angstgami. Let’s think of it another way: is the negation going to kill you? No. Obviously, as you are apparently indestructible. Here are the better questions: is the negation going to harm Sakura? Or anyone else? The answer is still no, as she has the magical ability to create Pandora’s Boxes. Seriously, Ogami. I’m pretty sure you are being emo for nothing. Just do it. Be with her. Stay under the radar, be careful, - and for god’s sake don’t bleed on her - and be happy. No one is going to judge you. Well, besides Heike and he matters approximately not at all.”

That was the stupidest thing he had ever heard in his life, surpassing every female’s attempt to hit on him (save her’s) and Shibuya’s recurring request to wear the infamous sheep costume every Halloween. Rei opened his mouth to tell him so, but Toki had one final point to canvass, and once on a roll was nearly impossible to stop.

“Here’s the thing, bro. Although you are milking the drama for all its worth, deep down you’ve considered saying ‘to fuck with it all,’ and taking your woman. I know this. You know this. And
just how do we know this?” Toki cut his salesman grin and his tone became serious for the first time all day. “Because you’ve had a vasectomy. Two years ago, in Germany, paid for with money Heike couldn’t track. And seeing as how no other woman in existence has ever interested you, it can be for only one reason - to be with her.”

Rei froze. That was far too specific. Toki knew. “How did you find out?” His eyes cut towards Yuuki, who raised his hands, shoulders, and eyebrows in a display of surprised innocence.

“First I’ve heard of it.”

Rei turned back to Toki, who watched him with appraising eyes. “Who told you?”

Toki raised an admonishing finger. “Ah ah ah- where would I be if I told you all my secrets? Rest assured, no one else knows. I’m not so stupid as to tell anyone, as the ramifications are obvious and Shibuya would likely kill the messenger. But none of that’s the point. The point is that you’ve taken steps to ensure that you won’t have children. Why else would you do that, if not for her?”

Rei hadn’t experienced the sensation of the world caving in on him for years. The figurative cross on his back felt unbearably heavy and for a moment, he could practically feel the flames of his own particular hell licking at his heels. Focus. He had to handle Toki, and then he could crack apart at the seams. “Simple precaution, and total lack of interest in having children. It has nothing to do with any specific regards towards Sakurakouji-san.”

“Bullshit. That’s not a simple precaution. What are you afraid of happening, someone stealing your sperm? C’mon, Ogami. Be honest for once!”

Enough was enough. Rei’s power flared and he was coated in blue flame. Toki took a step back instinctively, and Rei took the opening to flee. There were times when talking to Toki was like talking to a wind-up doll, and the only alternative was to run away or beat him unconscious, as otherwise he simply would not shut up. So he ran, relying on the memory of his power to keep either of his friends - and they were pushing it, he thought darkly - from following him.

Rei did not stop until he was miles away from the mansion, halfway to his temporary apartment. He hadn’t planned on going there, but now that his path was before his feet he saw no reason to diverge. There was too much to mull over, and too much rage to think clearly. Although he supposed he shouldn’t be surprised - Toki had always had the annoying ability of finding out precisely what drove Rei spare, and using it judiciously.

It was all too much. Seeing Sakura every day for the past several weeks was breaking him down; creeping along his bones like some sort of malignant disease. He tried to assure himself that he could have gone his entire life watching over her, but interacting her was something else entirely. Apart from the obvious charms, it made him remember his weakness from two years ago, when he had promised himself the vasectomy was only to ensure that his ability died with him, and not as a safety net in case his control might one day snap. Yet now was the time to be honest, and he had to admit that tired reasoning was nothing other than a lie. Truthfully, he had known it even at the time. It was why he had held himself away from her for several months directly after, not even trusting himself to observe her. Otherwise it would be too easy to approach her - sliding in behind her as she prepared dinner, peppering kisses down her neck; or sinking into her embrace within the confines of her bed. If the only consequences were the chance of negation - and Rei knew it was a rare event, and that there had to be something more to it than simply blood mixing - and a momentary reprieve from the cross he bore, he might not have been strong enough to stay away from her for the last six years. Yet he had reminded himself over and over of her fixation with family, and how it had been the guiding force on her - and his - path to redemption. That she would want one with him was inevitable, and had acted as the most important reason to stay away. He
couldn’t give her what she wanted, emotionally or biologically. Therefore, she should find it with someone else.

It was as simple as that. Except Sakura had never even looked at anyone else, and thanks to that goddamn blood dream, Rei could no longer deny his own desires. For all her talk of failure, Sakura had done quite a number on him during their time together. Although he had expected to dream of her, he had not expected to dream of them having a family, and the rush of joy he had experienced watching Dream Sakura interact with their Dream Child that could never exist should never exist-

She had called him in from the kitchen, and the tone of her voice had promised something nice. He left behind the half-finished model of Sanada Yukimura’s castle and joined her, pausing in the doorway to process the sudden flare of excitement in his heart. There she was, spaghetti sauce all down her front. Such was the charm of their life together that there hadn’t been even a fleeting fear that the color staining her blouse was blood.

“Will you get the camera? I want to take a picture before I clean it up!” His eyes dropped to the toddler in the high chair, and the upended bowl of spaghetti on her head. Noodles snaked down her face, and although she was covered from head to toe in cooked tomato, their child looked delighted.

“Oh perhaps you should join us first…” Sakura advanced slowly, and he it was only now that he realized the hand behind her back, ostensibly holding his bowl of spaghetti -or hell, knowing her it could be the whole can of sauce- and even though there was plenty of time to dodge or chide her for her silliness, he simply stood there, watching his daughter as his wife doused him in their dinner.

Rei shook his head violently, dispelling the fantasy. It had been only one small snippet of his dream of their life together that had encompassed everything from their first (real) date to their unnamed daughter’s first day of school. Seductive in its heartfelt simplicity, it had preyed upon his subsequent dreams and waking moments of weakness until it had threatened to drive him crazy. Perhaps it very well had. Why else would he lose his composure to Toki, for gods’ sake? Worse yet, it was making him regret his decision to render himself infertile, and that was too dangerous a road to go down. He couldn’t have children. Any chance of fathering another being like him was inconceivable, whether or not it was with her. Yet the love he bore for his dream daughter was refusing to fade, and he had awoken every subsequent morning swamped by a sense of loss.

There was no further way to deny the truth, even to himself. He, a non-person who existed only to clear the world of trash - and to this day he still had trouble believing anything else - wanted a family. His dream had been about not only Sakura but about the home they shared and the life they had made...and he could never have any of it.

And yet Heike could! Heike could, through stupidly unmitigated circumstances, have the very thing he now longed for! The thought of Heike and Yukihina raising a family together had first been somewhat worrying and yet also kind of funny until he had glanced over at Sakura and seen the disappointment in her dark eyes. Then the world had narrowed until all he could see and feel were the echoes of his dream. All at once he wanted her so badly. He wanted the family life that she had worked so hard to teach him. He wanted…!

Not for the first time, the futility of his situation overtook him, yet this time he didn’t think he could hide it under a fake smile. Especially since she was there, the reason for his unending struggle. He couldn’t return tonight. He would text Shibuya and let him know, and trust that his mentor would ask no further questions. As long as he was back in time for the story and training tomorrow, all would be well.
That was what he told himself every step of the way home. Whether he believed it was another question.

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“Do you think we went too far?”

“We should probably start running now, if that’s what you mean.”

“Nah, I think we’ll be fine. As long as he doesn’t find the script.”

“You kept the script?”

“I had to practice my lines, Fourth.”

“What lines? I had all the lines!”

“Yeah. Total drama whore.”

“You know what? I was half right. You start running, ‘cuz if I catch you I’m stringing you up by your ankles. Three-”

“Kinky, Fourth. Sure you haven’t been spending too much time with Second?”

“Two-”

“Yukinko probably would have something to say about that.”

“One.”

“Ohhhhh. Here it comes. Fourth’s angry face!”

“...I swear to God, Yuuki. Today is the day I end you. Gauss Cannon.”

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter brought to mind memories of the one and only Furby we ever owned. The experience took a turn for the demonic when the thing got stuck on a slurred repeat of all its phrases, and the latch to the battery stuck. The day was saved by Mom and a rather large knife, and that was the end of the Furby. (Just pretend Toki was the Furby, ok?)
(There was another homage to Samurai Deeper Kyo, if you caught it……)

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Next chapter teaser: Shibuya takes some time to go back to his roots, whereas back at the palace the day is saved by the power of (Soutarou’s) cuteness.
In Times of Peace

Chapter Summary

In which love is a dagger, and a promise.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is kind of long, to make up for the several week hiatus. Also, triple update. \(^_^/\)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1898

Takehiro glanced around him, checking one final time to make sure no one was following him. It had been a long trek through the ancient forest, and only a handful could keep up with him when he moved quickly and with purpose. Yet since his and Red’s altercation with Kyo, he couldn’t be too careful. Although he was fairly sure that the heir was back at the palace, waiting directly outside the queen’s door - where Red had been safely deposited last night at three in the morning - for a rematch, caution had grown along with his bones and he would take no chances. Not when he was headed back to his people’s hidden home.

There was time for a quick visit, but only just. Hideyoshi would be home either tomorrow or the next day, and he would not be pleased to find Takehiro missing. So he had traveled in the hours before dawn, promising Red he’d be back by sundown. He carried with him what little money he had managed to make, one bag full of trinkets they could sell in neighboring villages, and several more bags of food. Although the rare kinds had learned long ago to make do with very little, and to harvest the land for what they could, every little bit helped.

The dream skipped forward, the forest blurring into darkness. For a moment the watchers hung suspended, floating in the absence in the story until the thread was picked up again. Intrinsically they knew that the gap in the tale was to protect the location of the enclave, even after all this time.

It took a fair bit of his strength to roll aside the rusted, metal door, and it was even harder to close it once through. Yet on the other side of this final barrier was his enclave, lit by the early morning sun that filtered through the time-worn barriers.

“Takehiro!”

He turned to see the young woman just as she rose from the fields, basket balanced on her hip. He smiled as he recognized her. “Morning, Rin. Hard at work as ever, I see. And inside the village walls! Will wonders never cease?”

Rin made her way to her friend, swatting him on the arm when she drew close. “Hush, you. I’m
just back to visit my mother, is all.” She gave him a quick hug, her eyes already drawn to the bags he held. “And in perfect timing, too. Did you bring us more outside treasures?”

Takehiro held out the bag of trinkets, and she promptly deposited it in the basket, crushing the herbs and staining the air with their scent. He had planned on first showing his bounty to the village elder, but they would have ended up in Rin’s possession anyway. She was the only one determined and brave enough to lead the caravan outside the village walls, after all.

“Thank you, Takehiro. I suppose we should let the elder peruse them first, to see what we may need to keep here. But walk with me, friend! Tell me of the king’s palace!”

Her cheerful enthusiasm was infectious, and Takehiro found himself relaying stories in far more positive lights than he would for most other rare kinds. Rin was a rarity among their people, choosing to believe in a happy future rather than fear those that oppressed them. Even Takehiro, for all his strength, connections, and power-user friends, could not be so optimistic as she.

“Well, it sounds like you’re doing just fine! I’ve had quite a stretch of luck as well. See?” Rin glanced all around before loosening the tie on her high-waisted skirt, showing off a buckled, leather underbust corset. She smirked at Takehiro’s surprise. “Got it off a pirate power-user. Rather than let the king know he was here, he made an impromptu ‘docking station’ on a rocky outcrop at the southern shore. Luckily, we were nearby, and with a bit of haggling, got this for my trouble. Apparently I’ll never lose my youthful charm as long as I wear it...as well as always looking fabulous.”

Takehiro shook his head, but couldn’t help but grin at her audacity. She used her irrepressible cheer to good advantage in her travels as a trader, and was acknowledged as the most useful merchant in memory. That she was able to charm even hardened pirates was a testament to her skill. “May your reign never end, oh Merchant Queen. Although I am surprised your mother didn’t have anything to say about such a provocative garment.”

Rin smiled guiltily. “She would if she knew about it…”

“Yes. I’m home for half the year, unlike yourself. Besides, mother’s worries aren’t about what I’m wearing, it’s about the lack of men in our generation…” She trailed off, eyes widening in horror. “Oh gods - I forgot! Aya!”

Instinctively Takehiro glanced around, ready to run at the slightest notice. “What?! Where?!”

“No, she’s- she’s back at the village. But be careful, Takehiro. That potential marriage proposal fell through, and you know what that means.”

Takehiro did indeed. Aya was the only other rare kind in the village who had been born the same year as he, and she had taken that as the gods’ mandate that he was to be her future husband. That he had spent every subsequent year running from her and her advances made no difference in the future she had decided for them. Not even making his disinterest abundantly clear had done the trick. The only thing that had made a difference was when he had left to join Fujiwara. She couldn’t marry what wasn’t there, after all. He had hoped (and prayed) that she would have been married off by the time he returned, especially as she was attractive enough, if a bit bossy...and unpleasant...and overly critical...and rude...

In hindsight, his hopes had probably been a bit ridiculous. Especially since the ratio of unmarried women to men in the enclave was nearly 4 to 1. “So she still hasn’t given up, eh? I’ll have to be
quick this time. Hopefully she won’t know I’m here until it’s too late.”

“Who won’t know until it is too late? Ta-ke-hir-ro?” The voice belonged to a tall, elegant-looking woman, whose long limbs and pointed yet attractive face were decidedly aristocratic. Takehiro squeaked alarmingly, and attempted to hide himself behind Rin’s diminutive frame. Rin merely rolled her eyes.

“8 months, Takehiro! 8 months since you last came home! When are you going to stop gallivanting about the kingdom and settle down with me? Just how long do you intend to make me wait?” She raised a perfect eyebrow, and the sight of it made Takehiro’s eye twitch.

It also made him answer honestly. “Forever, Aya. You might as well get it now: I will never marry you. I would choose death over you.”

Aya ignored his sincerity, continuing as if he had never spoken at all. “We won’t be young forever, Takehiro! My mother was married at 15! Do you know what she says to me?”

“I care far, far less than you know.”

“A woman is only fertile for so long! Would you wait too long, and risk not doing your duty by the clan?”

Takehiro, knowing the utter implacability of this woman, grabbed Rin by the shoulders and thrust her forward. “Then I choose Rin. If the clan demands children of me, I’ll give them to her...eventually.”

Rin looked uncomfortably at the seething woman in front of her, and delicately picked his hands off her shoulders. “No thank you, Takehiro. I think I can find my own man.”

Aya smirked triumphantly. “You see? Fate has already chosen for you. We were meant to be.”

Takehiro growled in frustration. Like a dog with a bone; there was simply no reasoning with this woman! Besides, he’d wasted too much time already. Saying goodbye to Rin with a simple pat on the shoulder, Takehiro took off across the field, ignoring Aya’s admonishments and Rin’s encouraging cheers.

8 months eh? Maybe he should double it next time...

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After a long day of meetings with the clan elder; playing with the children; spending a few moments of quietude with the few, largely harassed males, and avoiding all the others with unmarried daughters, Takehiro found himself exhausted. Also late - even if he moved at top speed he wouldn’t arrive back at the palace until midday tomorrow. The sun was sinking, and he was on the wrong side of the enclave wall. Sighing, he considered staying back a day, simply to catch up on his sleep. He’d only gotten a blessed few hours after he had dropped Red off with her sister, although he had dozed while they had hidden inside the wall. Sleep had become a precious commodity to him, although his conversation with the elder had worked wonders in awaking his interest.

The village elder had leaned back upon hearing Takehiro’s report, and puffed thoughtfully from a
rolled cylinder filled with cloves and other herbs. “Nothing has changed since the last you were here. No demons or dragon or other creature of evil ilk has attempted to cross the barrier. Perhaps they cannot find us...or perhaps they do not wish to.”

It would confirm what Hideyoshi had told him of the council’s suspicions that the power users were the ones being targeted. Yet if he were to take it a step further, he could hypothesize that the evil creatures couldn’t sense the rare kinds at all. It was a dangerous supposition, but one with some merit. After all, Takehiro had managed to slay the dragon in a moment of the monster’s inattention, and up until then the beast had been hyperfocused on Kouji. Earlier still, when Red and he had faced the carrier, he had noticed how the demons swarmed to Red and only began fighting him when they made direct contact. He thought back, consolidating a case for his hypothesis, preparing the case that he would lay before Hideyoshi.

Lost in thought and the effort of picking his way through the failing light, he nearly stumbled over Rin. She was crouched over her basket, once again filled halfway to the brim with herbs. In her hand flashed a knife, but not with the customary curved edge her mother, the herbwoman would use. This was a straight-edge dagger, and even from a cursory glance Takehiro knew it was not only a well-decorated weapon, but a deadly one.

Rin looked back at him, and it took her a moment to rearrange her features into her normal smile. With a flick of her wrist the knife was concealed, and Takehiro was suddenly struck by the suspicion that the corset had not been the only bounty she had won off the pirate. “Good evening, Takehiro. Finally escaped from Aya and her mother, I see. Well done.” She stood slowly, keeping her left hand hidden in the folds of her skirt as she did. “I suppose you’re headed back now? It’s a shame, but I’ll be heading out too - hey, maybe we could meet up in a month or two? You remember my route, yeah?”

Takehiro nodded, non-committal. “Perhaps.” Expending more energy than he should - especially with the long trek home - Takehiro darted forward and grabbed her left hand, bringing it and the knife into the fading light. As he examined the knife, he realized his suspicions were incorrect. This blade was too finely wrought to be anything but a prized possession, with the gilt engraving and the expert smithing, and the way the sheen of the blade nearly glittered in the moonlight. This was a blade only a master craftsman might possess, or their rich and privileged customer. He had seen a few of its like among the nobleman of Takama ga hara. If it was indeed connected to her acquisition of her corset, there was more to the story than she had first admitted.

Judging by Rin’s gasp and the way she tried to pull back, it would take some effort on his part to learn the truth. “Takehiro!”

He glanced around to make sure they were alone. “I’m sorry, but that’s no pirate blade, Rin. Not originally, at least. This is a nobleman’s knife, and if it were to be discovered in your possession they would be legally bound to take it back from you...or your corpse. How could you accept such a thing knowing what it is?”

“I...I...!”

“And to bring it back here? What if it’s bespelled? I realize your touch would neutralize it, but you can’t keep it with you all the time.”

“Takehiro, wait~”

“Besides, this sort of blade...it’s not meant for simply protection, it’s far too flashy for that. This sort of thing...” Takehiro trailed off, belatedly noticing Rin’s blush and her determined expression. That, coupled with the strength in her grip as she finally succeeded in pulling the knife away from
him, gave him a different idea entirely. “Rin? Were you given the knife? As a gift?”

She glanced away, mutinously. “Yes,” she muttered, glancing back at him out of the corner of her eye. “I certainly didn’t steal it.”

“The pirate gave you the knife? For free?”

Rin glared down at her toes and mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like I’ll pirate you if you keep asking stupid questions.

“Rin.”

Her lips pressed into a tight line. “It wasn’t from the pirate. It was from...a friend.”

Takehiro folded his arms and unconsciously adopted the pose well known to any disbelieving father. “A friend. That knife? Try again, Rin.”

Her chin came up in defiance. “He is my friend. You aren’t the only one to have those, Takehiro!”

“This came from a power user, didn’t it?”

Rin jerked her chin at the insignia on his bicep, marking him as one of the field marshal’s men. “So did that.”

Takehiro gripped his shoulder. “This is different! This is something the clan knows about, and ultimately why I left! I have measured the risks and have proven that I’d die rather than betray the clan. I’m assuming no one else knows about your...friend? Of course not, otherwise they’d never let you leave the village. Rin, you can’t be this stupid.”

She took a step towards him, eyes blazing. “It’s not being stupid, Takehiro! I trust K- him with my life. And besides, I’ve never told him about the clan-”

“But you’ve told him about being a rare kind-”

“I had to! He saved my life, and realized it himself-

“And what, he just accepted it?”

“Your field marshal accepted you, didn’t he?”

That made him pause. It wasn’t just the field marshal, after all. Red and Kouji had also learned his secret, and although they were close to the royal family, had persisted in keeping it. Takehiro took a deep breath, recognizing his hypocrisy. Who was he to tell Rin who to trust? She had proven herself to the clan and the elder, and had always been a good judge of character. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Rin had something more to say.

“And I know this may not mean anything to you, but he’s not what you think. We met more than year ago, and he’s kept my secret all this time. And I know that accepting the knife was foolish, but I couldn’t turn it down! He gave it to me because he... he cares for me. And I…” She took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she did. “I care for him as well.”

Gods above, they were in love? Had such a thing ever happened, a power user with a rare kind? There were no stories of this, even to warn the children. Yet Rin was a practical woman, not usually given to fits of fancy. “You...you love him? And he returns your feelings?”

The light was just enough to see the sparkle of moisture in her eye, and Takehiro’s heart sank. Oh,
“I know, Takehiro. I knew. It’s hopeless and terrible and the wrong decision any way I look at it. But I do. I can’t help it! And yes, he…he loves me as well. It’s why he gave his blade to me, because that’s all he could give. He’s not married, but he can’t marry me, and gods above he couldn’t even give me children! Not that we tried, but even if I had wanted them the risk of them being power users is too high!” Rin closed her eyes, her attempt to stem her tears. “There’s no room in the kingdom for this love. Perhaps someday there will be a world where rare kinds and power users can exist peacefully… but I know it will not come in my time.” She smiled through her tears, her optimism present even now. “But for our children? Our children’s children? I will believe, and want it more than anything.”

“Rin…”

“It’s up to us, you know. To bridge the chasm between our people and theirs. If we can show them we’re not monsters, we have a better chance. But I am selfish, Takehiro. I want to be with him, even though I know it’s impossible. Hence, the knife.”

For the first time, Takehiro lamented never having been in love. He wanted to ease his friend’s pain, but there was very little he could say. In terms of her larger goal, however, he could make her a promise. “Peace will come. Someday. Whether in our time or our children’s, it will come. We’ll show them, Rin. And then…this kind of love won’t be impossible. A lot of things will no longer be impossible.”

Rin smiled sadly. “As long as the kingdom stands we’ll never be free. Even my… he admits that. All we can do is to fight for a chance.”

Souri Fujiwara’s image flashed before his eyes. Had he been a power user, Takehiro would have harbored dark suspicions. As it was, her words made him pause. “A chance for what? To be recognized? Or for a more permanent upheaval?”

“Just a chance. I’m not picky, nor a revolutionary. I just need something to believe in.”

“Riiiitiiinn!” Far off in the village, her mother called her in to supper. Both glanced over in the village’s direction, yet neither moved.

“Please don’t say anything. Please. I’ll keep the knife hidden, and if it’s discovered I’ll explain everything, but…please. I won’t endanger the enclave. No matter how much I love him I love our people more.”

Takehiro sighed as he stared at the knife. After a long moment of indecision, he finally nodded. With a whispered thank you Rin took off for the village, moving far more quickly than a normal human, yet not at the same standard as any decent power user might. He watched her go, wondering at the identity of her unknown lover, how they had met, and how it would all turn out. Ultimately it did not matter, as long as she kept her secrets.

In that moment he felt the weight of all his secrets keenly.

…”

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On the days when Kyo couldn’t train with them or Zed was being exceptionally moody, Sakurako believed she’d had nothing but a string of bad days ever since she arrived at the palace. She knew exactly what her mother would say: that she was being dramatic, or selfish, or moody herself. Yet she defied even her mother to claim that today’s training was anything other than a failure.

She had just pulled back from a hit that would have severely incapacitated Zed for the third time that morning. This was on the heels of four whole distracted days of sighs and averted eyes and that damn maid who had the audacity to giggle and flirt and make things worse. Sakurako helped him back to his feet, hoping that the close call would snap him back to his senses. When he did nothing more than give a little shrug in apology before sighing with that goddamn lovelorn expression in his eye, Sakurako snapped.

“That’s it! I can’t take this anymore! I am sick of this, Zed! When are you going to get over this?”

Zed stared back with wide, worried eyes. He reached out to reassure her, yet yanked his hands back when she began to glow with indicative white light. “What? Rako, what are you talking about?”

Sakurako glared at him and her fury made him take a step back. “You know exactly what I’m talking about! All your stupid little love games! You’re forgetting what’s important!” A crease appeared between his eyebrows, and although Sakurako could see she had annoyed him - a rare feat, considering how maddeningly even-tempered he was - she had finally blown her fuse and after months of being patient with him, she could take no more. “It’s like you don’t even care anymore! I think you’d rather chase girls than train!”

“That’s not true!”

“Oh yeah? Then why can’t you pay attention when I’m about to break your leg, huh? Or when I’m about to punch a hole in your face? Or-”

“I get the point, Rako-“

Sakurako’s hands started flapping like tiny, infuriated birds. While anger was no strange emotion to her, it was somehow difficult to keep yelling at Zed, especially when he had that hurt and bewildered look on his face. Now that he was starting to get angry, she was picking up steam. “Oh, do you? Then why don’t you do something about it? Instead of wasting my time while you waste away on stupid girls who don’t even like you anyway-”

“Shut up, Sakurako!”

They both froze, staring at each other. Zed had never yelled at Sakurako before, and she could count on one hand the number of times he had addressed her by her full name. That he did both now meant she had pushed him past his limits. It was funny then, that the sight of his angry face was making her stomach a riotous mess of anxiety, when only moments before she had wanted nothing more than to make him furious. She swallowed, hoping he couldn’t see the blood drain from her face.

“Sakur-“

Suddenly terrified of hearing whatever Zed had to say, especially if he was going to keep using her full name, she turned and ran from the sparring room. Heart pounding in her ears, she fumbled with the door’s latch before panic made her hasty. She lay a hand on the handle and simply blew her way through.

“Wait!”
No, no, no. Zed called out to her, but there could be no waiting when this unknown fear was pulsing against the inside of her skin. Zed had yelled at her. She had made him angry. She had wrecked everything. The certainty that she had driven away her only friend beat against her brain and lanced her chest, making her feel weak and clumsy and foolish, and all of it underscored the need to run. If she ran away, she couldn’t hear Zed tell her how much he hated her now, and how he’d rather spend time with all those other girls, and that he didn’t need her anymore, and that she’d never be his friend ever again-

Sakurako tore through the palace, searching for a place to hide. Hot tears slid down her cheeks, and every one of them was deserved. It was all her fault. Her fear, her jealously, her insecurity. Kyo had already told her how boys were at that age, and how odd it was that she hadn’t found a boy of her own to like. She added that to her steadily mounting fears and self-recriminations, and kept on running. How could she have lost her temper with Zed? About this? This was different than all their past squabbles and arguments - so little truly mattered to Zed, and even if she couldn’t understand his sudden attraction to worthless females she knew how lonely Zed was, and how important basic human interaction was to him. Besides, he had always been so patient with her! Whatever her whim or desire, he went along with it uncomplainingly.

Would he be like that with those other girls? Would he do whatever they told him to do? Would he leave me if they asked it of him?

No, because thanks to my outburst, they won’t have to!

Sakurako scrubbed at her cheeks with the back of her hand. That was enough. She was crying hard now, and if anyone saw she would be forced to kill them in a fit of maidenly rage, or put up with the queen’s curiosity for the rest of eternity. Thankfully she was close to her chambers, where she would be free to weep uninterrupted, as Zed no doubt hated her now and no one else cared enough to know precisely where she lived. Her nerves had calmed down enough to open her door without blowing it wide open, but it was not until she had closed the door behind her that she noticed the intruder, sitting on her bed with his little legs kicking wildly.

“Hello Ms. Sakurako! You run really fast! It was hard to catch up with you.”

Sakurako blinked in surprise. On her bed sat Soutarou, with his characteristic smile and all the energy of an eight-year-old. “Soutarou...how did you get in here?”

Soutarou’s little legs continued kicking at her mattress. “I went zoom as soon as you opened the door. Ahh, but maybe that’s impolite to do to girls? In that case, I am sorry Ms. Sakurako. I won’t go zoom to you again!”

“It’s..it’s fine, Soutarou.” She took a deep breath, honestly not caring how the boy had gotten into her room, nor was she angry at him for it. Although she was not so fond of children as Zed was, there was something about Soutarou that warmed her heart and made it impossible to be angry with him.

“But - you’re crying!” Soutarou immediately broke his promising of never zooming again, and flashed from the bed to her. “See, look! Your face is wet!” He took her hand in his own and tugged her to the bed. “Come, come!”

She followed him, feeling a bit silly to be mothered by a boy about half her age, yet not silly enough to stop him. She sat on the bed when he gently pushed her onto it, and let him poke his tiny face into hers so that he could cast a critical eye over the trace of her tears. Although she couldn’t see what was so fascinating about her crying face, she didn’t stop him - at that moment, she was far too sad and numb to care.
“I see. You had a fight with Mr. Zed, huh?”

Sakurako began to nod before she realized just how surprising the question was. “Wait, what? How did you know?”

The boy attempted to smile mysteriously, although it looked exactly as did his other smiles. “My eyes see a lot. Now, let me think. You fought with Mr. Zed...because you were scared? Was he mean?” Soutarou’s smiled dropped, and it was the saddest she had ever seen him. Clearly the boy loved Zed to pieces. Just as clearly, Sakurako couldn’t let him believe anything that terrible about her ex-best friend.

“Oh course not! Zed is never mean. It wasn’t - this wasn’t his fault. The fight was all my fault.”

“Then why did you fight with him?”

Sakurako sniffled, and tried to blink away the sting of moisture in her eyes. “Because I was afraid.”

Soutarou frowned in confusion. “If Mr. Zed wasn’t mean, then why were you scared?”

All of her fears swamped over her, and began spilling out of her mouth in a rush. “Because someday he’ll fall in love for real and then he’ll leave and I’ll be all alone and then he can’t be my best friend anymore because she won’t let him, and even if she did let him it still wouldn’t be the same because she will be there! We’re...we’re life and death, and there is no third thing, you see?” She sucked in a deep breath, emotion making her voice low and indistinct. “Everything is changing. He’s growing up, and I’m not. And he’ll go away, even if he doesn’t mean to. Sometimes...sometimes I think it might be better if he never gets full control over his powers, because I’ll have to be there for him forever, and then even if we’re not friends anymore, we’ll still need each other. But that’s terrible and then I feel terrible.” Sakurako began to cry in earnest, bringing up her knees to hide her face. “Ever since we came here I think all these terrible thoughts! I want Zed to be free, and I want him to do everything he wants to do, but not if he leaves! Not if he’s not my best friend! Not if he’s not my family.”

Soutarou sat and watched her, waiting for the worst of her sobs to pass. In his eyes sparkled genuine concern and empathy, yet his lips spoke only the truth. “You really love Mr. Zed, don’t you?”

“Not like that! I hate love!”

“I didn’t mean like how Mr. Zed likes all the pretty girls. That’s not love, Ms. Sakurako. I mean like how sisters love brothers, or how I love Hitomi, or how papas love their babies. That kind of love.”

Sakurako sniffled, her response muffled by her kneecaps. “Zed not’s my kid, Soutarou.”

“But you love him anyway. That’s why you are confused, and why you think mean things. It is why you are scared, isn’t it?”

Sakurako nodded. Truth be told, she had long considered Zed to be her family, and many of her private daydreams included discovering hidden blood ties between them, allowing them to be legally recognized relatives. If that were the case, they could always be close, and she’d never have to fear any outside influence. But the truth was the truth, and reality could not be bent to favor her wishes. In the eyes of the world she and Zed would never be anything more than friends, and would always be looked at with suspicion. Even her mother - the salacious, free-spirit that she claimed to be - had warned her about people’s assumptions upon entering the palace, and how she
and Zed would be watched for any sign of impropriety. At the time, Sakurako had ignored her warning. She and Zed weren’t like that, and she had no desire to be. Even now, that had not changed.

Yet Zed had changed, and even though he hadn’t fallen in love with her, he had started down a road that could only lead to their eventual division. Yet what else could he do? He was growing up, and such things were natural. Neither could Sakurako force him to not care, as she did naturally. Deep down she wanted him to be happy, and now she had no choice but to admit it was because she loved him, just as she did her parents.

None of her problems had been solved. She had not found an answer, nor did she have a plan to change herself or Zed... or even a way to apologize. Still, she felt better. Perhaps admitting her feelings had something to do with it. Tilting her head to the side, Sakurako gave the boy a tiny smile. “You know, you’re pretty smart for a little sprout.”

Soutarou smiled proudly, sensing the kindness behind her intent. “Thank you. But my papa taught me all about this kind of thing. He told me a story about a lady, who was his friend but kind of not...” His little shoulders rose. “It is com-pler-cated, I believe. And he certainly didn’t say it that way. But that was what he meant to say.”

Sakurako’s lips parted in surprise. She had never given a moment’s thought to either Soutarou’s or Hitomi’s parentage. “Your father? I hadn’t realized your father was here...”

He looked up at her in perfect confusion. “But you see him all the time! And Mr. Zed even lives with him!”

It felt as if the floor was moving beneath her feet. There was something intrinsically wrong with this conversation, and there was no way, no possible way that she and Soutarou were thinking of the same people. Yet she had to make sure. “But Zed lives with Kyo...because he’s the only one who can contain him when I’m not there.”

Soutarou beamed. “Yeah, I know. And ever since Mr. Zed moved in, Papa is a lot less lonely.” He sighed a little, but it wasn’t enough to darken his mood. “Sometimes I wish I could live there too, but then Hitomi would be lonely, and then I’d feel too bad...”

Sakurako’s mouth moved soundlessly, brain struggling frantically to make sense of all this. “Wait. Kyo is...you are...Kyo is your father?”

“You’re kidding!” Without giving her time to articulate her concerns (chief among them being Kyo’s ferocity, Soutarou’s sweetness and light, and the utter lack of family resemblance) Soutarou came right back to the heart of the matter. “But that’s not important! Are you and Mr. Zed going to make up now?”

Sakurako nodded, speechless. She was half afraid the boy would say something else earth-shattering, and while she didn’t think there was anything else left to say, she certainly didn’t want to find out.

“Excellent! Mr. Zeeddeddy! You can come in now!”

“What!” Sakurako launched herself backwards onto the bed, stifling the mad urge to destroy the wall behind her with her power and to escape out the back. Zed was there? The whole time? He’d heard?

The door opened slowly and Zed walked in, wearing as stoic an expression as she’d ever seen.
There was no apology in his stance, although there was a slight quirk in his lips that might have expressed such, had he let it. Sakurako’s eyes grew round and terrified, and she battled between the fear that he would cut off all connection with her now, or dare to mention the word ‘love.’

At her side, Soutarou tensed up like a hunted rabbit, eyes sparkling with excitement. “I’ll go now. Be good. Bye!” After that, he must have done his zooming thing again, as Sakurako didn’t see him again, not even to open the door. Yet it would have been hard for her to tell, as even though she was terrified her eyes never left Zed’s. For a long moment they simply stared at each other, and the tension mounted until Sakurako’s heartbeat throbbed against her throat, and fear danced along her skin. They had never seriously fought before. She simply did not know what to do.

Finally, he motioned her over with his hand. Supposing that it would be nobler to accept her fate standing up, Sakurako acquiesced, making her way over to him. As soon as they were only a foot apart she stopped, dropped her gaze to his chest, and tensed.

When Zed finally spoke his voice was low and unfamiliar, laced with nuances she couldn’t identify. “Are you prepared?”

There were a thousand things that could mean, and truthfully, she was prepared for none of them. But her remorse was controlling her body like a puppet on a string, and so she nodded jerkily. Then just to center herself, she closed her eyes.

Her only warning was his exhale. Then there was the pain that exploded across her forehead, causing her to stagger backwards and her eyes fly open. Across from her was Zed, clutching his own forehead and biting back several choice curses.

Out of all the things she hadn’t been prepared for, a headbutt hadn’t even been one of them. “What the hell?!”

“Jeez, Rako, your head is really hard. Please stop being so dumb or I’ll have to figure out a better way of doing this.”

Even though she had just been insulted, hope lit upon her heart. “Wait, I’m being stu-wait, wait. No. Zed, I’m sorry. It was my fault; I shouldn’t have-”

Zed laid his hand over her mouth. “No, Rako. Just listen. You’re being stupid, yeah? And you know why you’re being stupid?”

The unhappy muffled noises she made let Zed know that no, she did not know why she was being stupid, and neither did she appreciate the situation.

“You’re going to have to put up with it for a little while longer, because girls who are too stupid to know who their family is need some sort of punishment.”

Even though she felt bad, Sakurako was never accustomed to not having her own say. She tugged down Zed’s hand and scowled. “You already headbutted me, what more do you want? And we’re not family! Not really, and that’s the problem-”

Zed bent down and tugged her forward so that there foreheads were touching. Sakurako winced, but didn’t pull away. “Rako, will you just listen to me for once? Before your dad found me, I had a life, and a family, and a name. The demons took all that away from me but it doesn’t mean I forgot it. But then I met you, and I decided that it just didn’t matter anymore. So I threw it away, and I decided that you would be my family, and that no matter what happened, I wouldn’t lose you. And believe me, nothing is going to change that. No matter what happens in the future, you will always
be important to me - my sister, my training partner, my friend... all the things that we are. I will never leave you, Rako, because no matter how much freedom I earn, you’ll always be the one that gave it to me for free. Don’t you get it? It doesn’t matter how flustered girls make me! Even I know they don’t matter in the long run! It’s like you said: we’re life and death, and there is no third thing.

He pulled back just enough so that her startled eyes could search his, finding nothing but purpose there. Mind reeling, Sakurako latched onto the least remarkable aspect of his speech. “But you said you couldn’t remember your name…”

Zed shrugged. “I’d rather go by what you named me.”

Slowly, the salient points began to seep into her skull. “You mean it? We’re family? Even if no one else understands?”

“Who cares what everyone else says? We have a bond that no one can break. Not even death - real death - can stop us.”

Without further ado Sakurako threw her arms around him, smearing tears and snot all over his shirt. She held back from crying again, but only just. It had been a long day, after all.

He gripped her hand, lacing their fingers together, and squeezed her palm. It had been the Sakurakouji family custom when sealing their most solemn promises, and he used it now to show his sincerity. “Now, we’re going to go back and finish our session, and I’m not going to hold back. I’m not going to hold back on you ever again, got it?”

Her voice was shaky, but his conviction allowed her to swallow her tears. She squeezed his hand back, voicing what she already knew. “Promise?”

The serious expression in his eyes was undermined by his faint smile. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

In other news, Soutarou runs the palace. POWER OF CUTENESS.

... I know that we haven’t seen her for about 3 billion years, but there *was* a character in the manga who wore an underbust corset. Prizes on guessing who Rin ends up being. Hint: She was never named, nor was her face ever seen. BUT HER ‘SON’S’ WAS, QUITE A BIT. For added funsies: Aya wasn’t a canon character. BUT HER SON WAS.

... Zed and Sakurako’s parts are probably my favorite, yet also the hardest to write. I wanted to portray their familial love without verging into the romantic, yet also to illustrate the depths of their reliance on each other. (And just think: if Sakurako is this bad at handling platonic love, just what is she going to do when she finally meets Shibuya? Bwahaha I’m looking forward to writing that.)

... Finally: I just read the manga’s 5 years later epilogue - and this fic is now super AU. I saw the raws a long time ago, and they were what inspired this (and a lot of yelling, I will not lie). I didn’t know about her and Ogami’s “second bet” about who could save more lives - but I like my making her a lawyer too, and I still hate how they can never
meet again. Bullshit. So I’m doing it this way, and there is no stopping me! I will have my happy ending!!
Demons and Tea

Chapter Summary

In which a social event begins and ends badly.

Chapter Notes

Look at all this angstmance. I am a terrible action writer. Clearly I can only write about friggin’ feels.
Hmph.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1898

Her mother’s people had a saying: out of the frying pan, and into the fire. Karin had never appreciated the truth of the saying until now; having escaped from Kyo only to be currently sitting across the tea table from Lady Hanako Fujiwara and her brother-in-law.

Although she could be only a few weeks away from giving birth Lady Hanako directed the session with all the iron sweetness of an experienced hostess. “More tea, your highness?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Karin glanced over at her sister, sitting next to her with her usual impeccable posture. Her queenly mask was firmly in place, and because of that Karin had no idea how her sister felt about all of this. All she knew was that Hikari clearly respected the Fujiwaras enough to honor them with her presence, and trusted them to behave in regards to her half-blood sister.

“And you, Lady Shihoin?” Hanako’s tone was nothing if not welcoming, even though Karin knew that her presence was jarring. She felt it keenly, how could Lady Fujiwara not?

“I am fine, thank you.” Trying to remember what little her mother had taught her of feminine civility, she cast her eyes about the room. “Your apartments are lovely - do you stay at the palace often?”

She smiled graciously as she topped off her half-brother’s cup. “Indeed. Our home is to the south, and throughout the last half year or so it has been too dangerous to stay there. Yet even before the demon uprising we had spent much of the year here - Hideyoshi favors the city. It’s close to the king, and Hideyoshi claims most of his poetry is inspired here. And of course, the best midwives are here at the palace, so all our children were born here.”

Their children. Children born with the field marshal’s...assistance. Karin smiled weakly and took a long sip of her tea, wondering why Hikari would not just say something already. Clearly Karin was
doing a terrible job at it, and perhaps if Hikari chose the topic, it wouldn’t lead back to something that made Karin feel as if her chest was collapsing in on itself.

Yet her silent pleas to her sister went unanswered, and Souri turned to her. “Have you have any news from my brother? Do the demons still lie defeated?” It was asked with perfect friendliness, but the repercussions were not. Lady Hanako’s eyes swung over to him, and for a moment they flashed with disapproval. Karin swallowed. It had been apparent that she - like her husband - had not approved of a woman at the battlefront, yet it would seem that she approved of correspondence between her husband and another woman even less. That Karin could not read such a missive even if it came to her mattered little, although she had tried her best to hide her inability to read and write their language from these people.

All this was uncomfortable, yet it also forced her to reveal something that would undoubtedly hurt her sister. “I have not had any orders from the field marshal, but I did receive word from my cousin. To their knowledge the demons are still lying low, but they are being careful until they can confirm their defeat...and discover what the catalyst for their attack was.”

Souri nodded gravely, treating the matter with respectful gravity. Yet next to her Hikari stiffened, and laid a hand on top of Karin’s. “Sister, you- you heard from our cousin?” Although she was careful not to let the betrayal color her tone, Karin could feel it in the way her hand tensed over hers. Karin forced herself not to swallow nervously, knowing that both Fujiwaras watched them carefully.

“Yes, last night. He had addressed it to a friend, wanting to play a trick on him.”

While Souri’s brow furrowed in confusion, Hikari’s lips thinned. Lady Hanako merely watched, impassive and uncaring. “And was that the whole of the message? Did he only address the demons?”

Karin did not hesitate, although her heart sank even further. Hikari had nearly gone back to normal over the last day or so, but the mention of Kouji had shook her. This was the last thing they needed in front of the field marshal’s wife...and his unpredictable brother. “That was one line. The other was simply to say that he wouldn’t be back for at least a few more weeks. He’d been chosen to investigate a few villages more closely.”

Hikari turned to face her and Karin could see her desperation. It was there only for a moment, but she feared she was not the only one at the table to see it. “Do you have the message with you?”

“I...I do. It won’t be of much use, however-”

“Let us see.” Hikari glanced at Lady Hanako, as if suddenly remembering they were there. “Would you not like to see a missive from the front, Lady Hanako?”

She nodded slowly, dark eyes never leaving Karin. Karin suddenly felt an irrational spike of annoyance. Hikari acting like this was one thing, and after careful thought, Karin finally understood why. It wasn’t like she could help whom she loved, even though Karin thought her sister surprisingly unstable when it came to dealing with it. But why did Lady Fujiwara watch her with such suspicion? She had done nothing to her save serve under her husband - well, and entertain feelings for him, but she didn’t know that!

Not even daring to glance at Souri, she simply reached into her pocket and retrieved the crumpled missive. Unfolding it, she laid it down at the center of the table, and waited for the inevitable.

Souri looked up nearly immediately, an amused, calculating glint in his eye. She met his gaze with
“What is this? What script is this written in?” Lady Hanako looked away from the paper, mildly displeased that she could not read the message. Karin’s eyes cut to her sister, pale fingers resting on the paper, before she responded.

“It is in my native tongue. Kouji learned enough of it for something like this. We thought it safer to communicate this way, in case the letter was intercepted.”

Hikari, who had heard the two of them converse in the language - had even been taught the bare rudiments of it - said nothing. Karin doubted she could read more than a few words, but they had taught her an important one: demon. She suspected it was the word her sister’s eyes sought.

Once more, Souri cut in unexpectedly. “If I may ask, what is your people’s word for demon?”

Karin looked up at him, surprised. This was twice now that he had seemed to read her mind. If she could not feel his lack of power, she would have been very suspicious indeed. As it was, she merely thought back to Takehiro’s caution, and nodded. “Here: skraeling.” The word sat heavily on her tongue after months of speaking largely Japanese. It sat heavier on her mind as memories of her father’s death rose to choke her-

The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the trees when Kouji called a halt to their sparring session. They made their way home laughing and arguing, but were silenced when a scream rent the air. Then, they could feel it - holes in the air filled by unholy presence, and Karin, who had removed her restrictor cuff during their bout could sense something more - blood had been shed, and in great quantity. It was in the direction of her home.

They had moved faster than the wind, faster than thought to reach it in time, but it was too late. Coal-black monsters reared at the doorway, featureless save for the gaping maw that stretched vertically from head to belly. Kouji dispatched one, slicing it through with his katana, yet Karin stood motionless, transfixed by what lay behind. There were two more within. One feasted upon the remains of the king’s messengers. The other, with ripples of chalky bone - all that was left of its once-human host - flashing from underneath his shadowy flesh, had swallowed her father whole. She could still see him inside the demon, mouth opened to scream as he was slowly dissolved-

Karin came back to herself with a start. That had not been the first time she had relived her father’s demise, but it certainly had been the most vivid… Her stomach roiled and her mind blanked, and she knew she had only a few moments before she spilled the contents of her stomach onto Lady Hanako’s floor. She stood abruptly, interrupting Hikari and Lady Hanako’s stilted conversation. “I’m sorry, but I need - may I please excuse myself?”

Souri rose as well. “Do you need assistance? You look unwell, Lady Shihoin.”

Karin waved him off. “No, no thank you. Just...please excuse me.” After that, there was no time to notice her sister’s concern or Lady Hanako’s distaste. She rushed from the room, barely making it to the bathroom before the acidic bile burned her throat, and she could hold back no longer.

She cried as her stomach was purged, remembering the pain of losing her father. If only she had been stronger, or faster, or better at sensing through her other ability! If she had gone against his wishes and trained harder in blood manipulation, perhaps she could have sensed the demons sooner - for by their estimation the messengers had been the first die, and it had been a slow death. Then she would never have lost him, and her home, and her old way of life-

-yet then she would have never met her sister, or Takehiro, or Field Marshal Fujiwara. She would
never have known the taste of seaweed, or eel, or octopus. She would have never heard the three-stringed shamisen, nor seen pale-painted males act as women onstage. As her stomach settled so did her tears, and she remembered her sister’s advice, given when they watched the stars overhead, soon after she first came to Japan. *Mourn not for what you have lost, for then you mourn what you have now.* Sound advice, but difficult to follow. Still, Karin had never settled for what was easy.

Before fumbling with the door, she rummaged in her pocket for a mint leaf to chew upon so that her breath might not offend her hostess. What she saw upon opening the door nearly made her swallow the leaf in surprise, however. A tiny girl stood there, eerily silent and still. Karin’s heart hammered in her chest, as she remembered tales of ghost children that haunted homes - tales that both Hikari and Kouji had sworn were true. Yet when the initial moment of panic faded so did her sense return, and the fact that she could sense the child through both the wind and her blood meant the child alive. In fact, she was probably the Fujiwara’s youngest child, the one for whom her father had made the doll. She tried to remember the child’s name but came up blank. Yet the child was still staring at her, and Karin wondered if the child was too young to speak...or if she had scared the child stiff. Suspecting it was the latter, she crouched down and smiled, hoping her features would not put off the child further. “Hello. I’m sorry if I surprised you. My name is Karin.”

The girl merely watched her, dark eyes impassive and somehow reminiscent of her father’s. Karin’s smile faltered, before settling into something a little more natural. Now that she had seen a hint of the field marshal in his daughter, she was predisposed to like her more than she liked the mother. “What might your name be, little one? Are you a Fujiwara?”

The girl nodded slowly, keeping her eyes fixed on Karin’s.

Suspecting the child might be too young to speak well, Karin tried a question she could answer nonverbally. “I see. Are you the youngest then? How old are you?”

The girl held up five fingers without hesitation. Five was definitely old enough to speak. Yet on further reflection, she didn’t seem to be afraid of Karin - otherwise she would have run away long before now. Perhaps the child was simply shy? Karin glanced in the direction of the living room, knowing she should return, but preferring to stay with this odd child.

In this moment of indecision, the little girl reached out and tugged on Karin’s sleeve. Her tiny fingers grazed the back of Karin’s wrist, and once again Karin’s mind was flooded with the images of demons - yet this time, it was of when she and Takehiro had stood against them. With effort she was able to wrest her concentration back, falling backwards and banging her head against the wall as she did so. Before she could recover, small hands cupped her face and those oddly familiar eyes stared into hers. Within a heartbeat Karin felt as if her mind might be ripped apart - one of her eyes was reliving her experiences with demons, yet the other was firmly fixed in the present, staring down Fujiwara’s youngest child.

*I am Maka. Now tell me what they are.* The voice in her head was like nothing she had heard before. Even Hikari could not speak mind to mind, and yet there was no doubt that it was the child herself. Karin belatedly remembered that this girl was apparently the most powerful of Fujiwara’s line. Now, she could see why.

“What do you mean?” Karin whispered, unable to communicate as the girl did.

Instead of replying, the visions of the demons grew prominent, yet they were no longer her own experiences. She had never faced such a multitude of demons at once, and none had ever worn a crown… Suddenly she understood what the girl wanted. “*Demons. They are demons. They are what your father and I fight.*”
The girl removed her hands, and Karin slumped over in relief. For her mind to be split in such a way was distressing although no longer painful now that it was over. Yet worse was experiencing the echoes of the girl’s own mind - those last images had certainly not been Karin’s own. The girl had either seen those demons herself...or known those who had. Karin suspected that with her powers, there was not so much difference between those two options.

“I am sorry. But you knew. And they would not tell me. But I am sorry I made you sad.”

Karin’s eyes flew to the girl’s. They were no longer impassive, but the regret in her dark would have been difficult to see had one not been looking for it. “You showed me earlier, didn’t you...Maka? You made remember.”

Maka cast her eyes down, and brought her toes in so that they touched. Her voice was little more than a whisper. “The monsters scared me. I see them all the time, now. But Mama does not listen, and says they are not real. But you know them - you have seen them. Like Papa and Uncle.”

Maka was on the verge of tears, and it tugged at Karin’s heart. Yes, the girl was wrong for having made her relive her memories...but she was only five! And apparently inundated with memories of demons! How would Karin have handled such a situation at that age? Not well, she decided, and rather than blame the child for it, pulled her into her arms.

The girl gasped, and quickly brought up her hands to hide her face. Karin hugged her tightly, feeling the tell-tale shivers wrack Maka’s thin frame. “It’s all right, little one. It’s not your fault. You can cry if you like, but don’t fear the demons - your father and the army will defeat them! You’ve seen my memories now, and know it can be done! Do not worry, Maka - your father will save the day.”

Maka removed her hands from her face and threw them around Karin’s neck, pressing her wet cheek against Karin’s. She held the child as she sobbed, and Maka’s grief and imperfect hold on her power allowed memories to flash from Maka’s mind to her own, seemingly at random: being teased by her elder twin siblings; how her mother was both ashamed and disapproving of her daughter’s strange powers; her father sitting at his writing desk, dangling a hand down to pat her head as he scribbled away. Thankfully there were no more images of demons, as Karin’s own heart was already throbbing with the echoes of this young girl’s misery. She contented herself with stroking Maka’s hair, and eventually murmuring soothing words in her native language.

It was that that eventually roused Maka from her grief. “Dearink?” She asked with curious, wet eyes. Karin couldn’t help but smile as she wiped the girl’s cheeks with the backs of her fingers.

“Dearling. Like darling, I suppose. Or dear one. It is what my mother would have called you.”

“Why wouldn’t she say it in Japanese?”

Karin nearly laughed aloud, checking herself at the last moment. “She didn’t speak Japanese. Only my father did.”

Astonishment blossomed over Maka’s face. “Does that mean...are you...?” She took a deep breath. “Are you a forn-ner?”

Karin couldn’t help but laugh this time. The girl was obviously astounded, and just as clearly had only a vague idea of what a foreigner was - otherwise it should have been obvious! “Yes, I should say I am. Although only half, as my father was Japanese. Couldn’t you tell?” She teasingly tugged at her fiery curls and widened her blue eyes. “See?”
Maka nodded, but cast doubtful glances at Karin’s hair. “Are you sure? But I understand you when you talk...”

Karin laughed again, and impulsively hugged the girl again. She had not expected to find such an angel in the Fujiwara household, nor one with such a dangerous ability. Yet Maka was the perfect mixture of intelligence and naivete, all with the wide-eyed fascination of the very young. That such a dark shadow loomed over her and made her act with the maturity of a much older child made Karin want to protect her. She loosened her hold on the girl, smiling when Maka chose to settle herself into her lap, content to spend more time with her.

Maka seemed to gain courage in leaps and bounds, demanding to play with Karin’s hands with the self-assurance of children. After a long while of poking and prodding at Karin’s musculature, she finally set her sights on her hair, the most obvious beacon of her foreignness. Maka was fascinated. “Why does it go round and round like that?” She asked, pulling a strand and watching it spring back up once released. Her eyes widened, and Karin accepted she would be here for at least ten more minutes, having her hair pulled.

“Because it is curly. So is Kouji’s, if you ever meet him. He straightens it every morning, though, because he hates it.”

“Is his red too?”

“No, his is black.”

Maka pouted. “Then it’s not as good. Is Kouji your brother?” She pulled a larger strand this time, and it did not bounce as satisfyingly as the thinner strand did. She pouted.

Karin tried very hard not to laugh. In an odd way, it felt a little like laughing at the field marshal. “No, but he is my cousin. It is almost the same thing.”

“Who was the other boy? The other one you like?”

Karin began smoothing back Maka’s hair, on the off chance it would distract the girl from tugging at her own hair. Knowing that Maka couldn’t possibly mean the person she actually liked - she certainly knew her father, after all - Karin assumed she was referring to the memory of them fighting demons together, and the beginning of their friendship. “Hmm? Oh, Takehiro. He’s our friend. And no, his hair isn’t curly.”

Maka was not impressed. “Well then what good is he- oh! Papa!” Her jerked to the left and every molecule in Karin’s body froze. She had been so distracted she hadn’t even thought to sense for the three having tea in the living room, let alone the unexpected field marshal! Yet there he was, just turning the corner, and Maka leapt out of her lap and into her father’s arms.

“Papa! I missed you!”

The field marshal scooped her up, and kissed her soundly on the forehead. Karin averted her eyes as her murmured something into his daughter’s hairline. This was a private moment, and she suddenly felt very out of place. She stood, preparing to head back into the tearoom and to let them have their moment.

“Karin.”

She froze and glanced back at the field marshal. He had never referred to her that way, and her given name on his lips made her heart sputter. Attempting to save face she jerked down into a bow, and greeted him.
Maka shimmied her way down from her father’s hold and grabbed Karin’s hand. It brought the smile back to her lips, and as she very carefully did not look at Hideyoshi, she missed the smile it brought to his. “Papa, when you are gone may I live with Karin?”

Both smiles dropped immediately. Karin’s mind flew to the memories of Lady Hanako’s dislike, but the field marshal surely didn’t know of that! He had been nowhere in those memories. How would he take such a question?

Seriously, it seemed. “Why?”

Maka looked up at Karin and beamed. “Because I want curly hair too!”

“Well if that is all it takes, perhaps we should all go and live with Lady Shihoin. Between her cousin and herself, curls are soon to be in vogue, I suspect.” Souri Fujiwara leaned against the doorway between the living room and the hallway, watching the reunion with an amused glint in his eye. “Forgive me for interrupting, but my dear sister-in-law sent me to make sure you hadn’t gotten lost. But it seems I have caught a greater prize. Welcome home, brother.” He strode to his brother, choosing to embrace him rather than clasp hands. When he was distracted Maka edged behind Karin, and when Karin looked down and met her gaze she was overtaken by a sudden, recent memory: ‘...you have seen them. Like Papa and Uncle.’

Karin’s mouth went dry, and the epiphany sent a spasm of fear through her bones. The younger Fujiwara wasn’t a power user, and as such had remained at the palace for the entirety of the demon attacks. How, then, could he have seen the demons?

The Field Marshal pulled back from his brother’s embrace, squeezing his shoulder in acknowledgement. “I would like to say it’s good to be home, but unfortunately I cannot. I just came from a briefing with the king. Shihoin, pack up and be ready to ride out at dawn. The units stationed here will move out then.” The field marshal’s voice was tired, and Karin had no doubt that this was no routine procedure. Unless she was very mistaken, the demons had awoken and struck again.

Maka gasped, hiding her face against Karin’s leg. Karin was unsure whether she was simply overcome at her father’s tone of voice...or whether she had seen something in the brief moment her father’s eyes had connected with hers. Karin rested her hand on top of Maka’s head before responding. “Understood, sir. My sister is in the next room - shall I tell her, or do you wish to?”

“Tell her whatever you wish. Her husband will no doubt require her presence shortly.”

“Then it is serious? They have attacked?” Souri moved away from him, stepping closer to Karin and Maka. He laid a hand on Karin’s shoulder, not realizing it was tense precisely because he was touching her. “Worry not, Lady Shihoin - I’m sure your cousin is safe-”

“Souri.” Those two syllables held venom, and both Souri and Karin’s eyes flew to him in surprise. Yet when he continued the anger was gone. “I need to speak with you, privately. Let the lady make her goodbyes.”

Karin swallowed thickly as Souri’s hand left her shoulder. She knew the field marshal could be abrupt when overworked, but irrationally she felt as if he had just saved her. Acting on a half-understood impulse, she curtsied to the younger Fujiwara rather than bowing. She noted his pleased surprise as she did.

Whatever his own goodbye would have been was lost when Hideyoshi grabbed him by the arm and practically manhandled him down the hallway and into the bedroom. Whatever the topic of
their conversation they kept their voices low, and when it was obvious that neither man would re-emerge anytime soon, Karin dropped down to her knees so that she could hug the little girl goodbye. Maka sniffled at her shoulder, clutching her with all the strength in her small arms.

“I hate the war. It takes Papa away, and makes Mama angry, and Uncle...it makes him think about bad things. I wish it would end. I wish the demons would just go away.” Maka was moments away from bursting into tears. All Karin could do was hug the girl tightly, and whisper her assurances.

“The war will be over soon, dearling. Your father and I...and Kouji and Takehiro and the army will defeat the demons. Then we’ll come home, and everything will be fine. Be a good girl, all right? It will all be over soon.” She pulled back to lay a quick kiss on the girl’s forehead, in precisely the same spot Hideyoshi did. For a moment her lips tingled, and she guiltily wished that Maka could have been her daughter, under very different circumstances…

“And be careful with the sad lady. Her mind is all swirly.”

Karin blinked. “What? Sad lady? And how is her mind...swirly?”

“Well, maybe it’s swirly because she’s sad, but she still makes me want to run away.”

*Show me who you mean* was on the tip of her tongue before she realized she knew exactly who Maka meant. There was only one other adult in the apartment right now, and she certainly was sad enough for her mind to be...disordered. Karin remembered the panic during their teatime episode, and the remorse Hikari had shown after. Yet most of all she remembered that sense of betrayal, and the knee-jerk reaction to fight Hikari out of her mind. *Do you love me?* Hikari had asked. Of course the answer was yes - was still yes - but now she knew her sister to be a threat. So did Kouji, and now this child as well. Karin did not want to think about what that meant. So she merely smiled at the girl, and whispered her promise to be careful. Then she took her by the hand, and led her into the living room where Lady Hanako and Hikari waited.

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It was a week before the close of the year, and the demons to the south had finally attacked in full. It was to be the last year of the kingdom of Takama ga hara.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone was wondering when Maka was going to up and be important, now is the time. Also, I’ll try not to go almost a month without updating again, but with the real life grind and EOA updates, I may get a bit behind (again). So review and kick my ass into writing, yeah? (^_-)
All Lovers are Star-Crossed

Chapter Summary

In which the countdown begins and old friends are remembered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2018.

As soon as they surfaced from the dream, Ogami leaned over and clutched his left forearm, gritting his teeth as if he were facing an enemy the rest of them could not see. Yuuki could hear his heart pounding in his chest, and the minute crackle of burning hair along Ogami’s arm - something that Yuuki had not heard since the last time Code:Emperor had surfaced six years ago. He supposed that was the force Ogami was trying so hard to subdue, although he wasn’t sure why. The two Hellflame wielders had come to an accord, and Nyanmaru had openly suspected they even liked each other.

Soon the struggle became too much even for Ogami. He strode from the room, catching Nyanmaru’s eye and shaking his head at her as he walked out. This didn’t stop her from standing and chasing after him, although the door he slammed behind him did.

The others simply glanced around at each other, clearly wondering what the hell was going on. Even Kouji looked somewhat confused, although Mystery Ladymaru #2 pressed her lips into a tight line and Nisemaru had his eyes hidden by the brim of his messenger cap. Nisemaru’s unexpected solemnity was enough to keep Ruirui and Fourth quiet, at least for a few moments. Yuuki’s own eyes closed when he heard the faint sounds of Code:Emperor breaking free of Ogami’s hold, and forming - if he could guess from Ogami’s annoyed mutters - into flame form, rather than human form. A moment later, Ogami opened the door he had so abruptly shut in Nyanmaru’s face.

“He wants you.”

That was it. No further explanation, and Yuuki could see it piqued Ruirui and Fourth’s interest. But Nyanmaru simply nodded as if she expected the summons, and stepped in after Ogami, closing the door behind her.

“So, is anyone going to explain what that secret powow is about, or-”

Mystery Ladymaru #2 suddenly shot forward, inhaling with a hiss as she clamped her hand over her left eye. Almost immediately, blood began to seep through her fingers. Mystery Ladymaru shot forward, trying to pry her hand away from her eye, but Kouji simply reached down into his pocket and retrieved his cell phone. His thumbs hovered over the touchscreen as Mystery Ladymaru succeeded in pulling Mystery Ladymaru #2’s hand away from her eye, revealing a heterochromatic set that rivalled Fourth’s six years ago, only the newly blue eye was still leaking a slow stream of dark blood that seemed to come from the iris itself.

That got Nisemaru’s attention. As Mystery Ladymaru dabbed at the blood, Nisemaru glanced over
at Kouji and shook his head. However, Kouji didn’t put the cell phone away until Mystery Ladymaru #2 pulled the blood from her face into a ball between her fingertips, and regarded it gravely.

She blinked hard to test her vision before responding. “I think we’re still ok. She’s still asleep, at any rate. We should have two or three more weeks, although if we don’t find out the source of the secondary vibrations…” She trailed off, finally realizing that three Code:Breakers were still in the room. Looking at Fourth’s dark expression for a moment, she continued anyway. “Sakurako and Zed need to get here. There is no more time to waste. If they can’t find the source we’ll have to figure something else out. I’m sorry Takehiro, but—”

He shook his head, cutting off his friend. “No, you’re right. Kouji, you call Sakurako. I’ll get ahold of Zed. No more story today, we’ve got to increase the training regimen.” If he was upset at the thought of seeing his ex-wife for the first time in countless years - they hadn’t come in contact even during the war against Eden, after all - Yuuki couldn’t tell. Even his heartbeat was steady and purposeful, like his resolve. “Karin, are you ok to fight? Or will prolonged use of your power make it worse?”

Yuuki glanced over at his friends on the couch. Ruirui looked as confused as he, but Fourth’s eyes narrowed, as if he, too could see the implications of Mystery Ladymaru # 2’s fighting.

Karin stood, stretching the blood until it was long and thin. She then used tied it about her hair, keeping the curls out of her face. “Let’s try one-on-one, first. If I can feel her shifting, we can take a break, but I highly doubt we’ll wake Asura during a bout. Especially as I’ve been using my ability for the last seventy years without a hitch.”

Nisemaru nodded. “All right, then. Take on Toki first, and Kouji - you take Yuuki. After that—”

“So Rei and I will face each other first? Should I go an interrupt the Emperor?” Ruirui looked decidedly pleased with that option. Although he no longer attempted to antagonize her - and was still an avid fan of her music as 8 Tears - it seemed that Ruirui’s habits died slowly.

Nisemaru stood, and in that movement Yuuki could see a flash of regret pass over his usually hidden features. “No...we’ll give them some time. They deserve that much. If it takes too long we’ll interrupt them then, but for now I’ll take you on.”

Nyanmaru’s voice drifted through the closed door, loudly enough that everyone could hear. “…your mother, Ogami!”

Everyone in the living room froze into a living tableau. Yet only Yuuki could hear his response, delivered with quiet finality. “That’s why he needs you. Please, Sakurakoji-san.”

Knowing that there was no possible way to block his ears from hearing whatever came next, Yuuki stood abruptly, before flashing over to Kouji. Nonchalantly, he laid an arm over the older man’s shoulder. “Well then. Let’s get to it, huh?” His volume rose as the shift of cloth and skin rubbing together in the next room caught his attention. Ogami and Nyanmaru were hugging now, or something close to it, and that meant one or both of them was close to breaking. Nothing more would warrant the dissolution of Ogami’s iron resolve. “Enough of that story stuff - it’s time to get the party started!”

Ruirui was staring at him like she’d never seen him before, but Fourth watched him with a knowing expression on his face. That was what came of spending the better half of last year with the guy on missions, Yuuki supposed. But Nisemaru watched him with a small smile, and the knowledge that he had made his trainer proud made Yuuki both happy and a little embarrassed all
at the same time.

By now, Kouji had also caught on. “Indeed, we need to get started. But let’s make it interesting. If you can beat me down to the basement, I’ll give you a handicap, yeah? Read.” He snatched the back of Yuuki’s shirt just as he ignited forward, nearly clotheslining him. “Ah ah ah! No cheating, little boy. Do it properly. Ready, set…”

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The Code:Breakers trained all that day, barely breaking for chances to eat and rest. After a long morning fighting Karin, Toki had finally managed to battle her to a standstill. That it took three gauss cannons and a strategy that left him somewhat useless for the next day or so didn’t matter. It had afforded him the chance to force her back to the wall, and to look at him clearly for once, without the ghosts of his father and uncle getting in the way. When she tipped him a nod in recognition it was a victory sweet enough to evoke an answering smile, and his sense of achievement was augmented by her uncomfortable attempt to answer to his friendliness. She didn’t like him, he was well aware of that. Save for his eyes his resemblance to his father was uncanny, and his aunt had told him too much of her history with his uncle for her to be comfortable with him. That in itself was fine. He certainly didn’t care whether she liked him or not, but if her dislike had gotten in the way of taking him seriously in a fight, he would have been more than justified to have words with her. Well, more than the few they had already exchanged…

Toki frowned as he leaned over the railing, watching Rui and Kouji battle below. His arms throbbed in time with his heartbeat, and his head felt as if he had smashed it through several brick walls, but he was still standing, and that was what counted. His eyes tracked the movement of the shadow Rui crafted. She was starting off simple, waving her evanescent scythe around her and aiming for non-vital points on Kouji’s own shadow. Yet his defense was far too strong for such a straightforward maneuver, and Toki sighed in annoyance. He loved the girl, he really, truly did, but her inability to go all out on those she loved got on his nerves sometimes.

Apparently he wasn’t the only one annoyed. Kouji twisted skeins of wind around her ankles, hoisting her into the air until their faces were even, but at opposite angles. He stepped close and spoke to her, anger etching into his features. Toki was too far away to hear what he said, but whatever it was seemed to do the trick. Rui fought free of his hold, legs arcing out to slow her descent as her hands wrapped around his neck. From his vantage, Toki could see the sly smile spread across her features just as the ribbons of shadow denoting her Empress Paradox form rippled over her body.

Toki smirked. *Clever girl...* she had waited until Kouji lost his temper with her and then taken the advantage. The surprise and her momentum worked together to knock Kouji flat on his back, and for a moment it looked as if her gambit had worked. She straddled him and smiled victoriously before lifting a hand to shape the darkness into a solid, massive sphere that crackled at her fingertip-

-and promptly fizzled out when Kouji placed his hand over hers, vaulting upwards so that they were suddenly nose to nose. Toki shook his head. Rui had been smart, playing to his weakness...but
she had forgotten that he knew her weaknesses more intimately than anyone else. His exceptional eyesight took in the heightened flush of color on Rui’s cheekbones, yet for once it didn’t denote embarrassment. After all, in her Empress form, Rui felt acknowledged no shame...only her deep-seated desires.

Momentarily distracted from the battle, the blind Protector Goddess trailed her fingers up the length of Kouji’s neck, arcing into his touch on her lower back. Any of Toki’s lingering doubts about Kouji’s being totally into Rui vanished when his eyes lidded, and he angled his face so that his nose slid neatly against hers. They were moments away from kissing - and even he was starting to feel a bit squirmy at how inherently hot they were - when divine intervention came in the form of Shibuya, hurtling across the room and slamming into the ground only two feet away from them. Everyone in the basement froze. Even Ogami, who had launched his teacher when he had tried to enter into his and Karin’s fray. Yet Shibuya was the first to break the moment when he recovered from his harsh landing, groaned, and sat up. He then blinked, glanced around, and swore. “Oh shit-”

He was cut off by twin attacks of wind and shadow, nearly overcoming him before he scurried out a hidden trapdoor. In the aftermath, Ogami and Karin glanced around awkwardly, unsure whether they should restart their sparring session before the second shoe dropped. Kouji, on the other hand, knew what was best for him. In the few seconds before Rui erupted, he placed his hands on her waist and lifted her off of him, gently settling her down at his side. He leaned in close and seemed to mutter something at her temple, yet from Toki’s angle he couldn’t see the words his mouth shaped. The next moment found him at the opposite end of the basement, grabbing his cell phone before he made his way up the stairs.

Yet it wasn’t until the door swung closed behind him that Rui lost it. With a yell reminiscent of a screaming tea kettle, Rui launched herself at Rei, who found himself fending off two frighteningly strong females at once. Toki smirked, but couldn’t bring himself to watch any further. The strain on his twisted knee was getting fairly serious, and he had to ice it before it got any worse. That in mind, he made his way along the catwalk, wincing with every step.

Poor Rui. Girl just couldn’t catch a break, could she?

***

Toki had assumed no one would be in the kitchen, but he had forgotten about Sakura...and Code:Emperor. She flitted about the kitchen, chopping vegetables and checking the bubbling stew, the very picture of domesticity. Code:Emperor floated at her side, subdued, yet not above critiquing her chopping technique, and asking her if they couldn’t just put another two pounds of beef in the stew, as kids these days were too damn skinny. Toki had to clutch at the door frame to keep from boggling at the surreality of it all. Also, he was not too skinny, thank you very much.

Sakura must have heard him, for she turned around and attempted to smile warmly. “Ahh, Toki-kun! Are you hungry? Or simply looking to pass time?”

Toki tried not to look at Code:Emperor as he made his way to the freezer. All he had to do was grab the bag of peas and get out, and then he could wonder about why in god’s name Sakura was still hanging out with Code:Emperor. Toki had assumed that whatever the excitement this morning had been about was over, as Ogami was down in the basement fighting for his life. The fact that Code:Emperor chose to play domestic fireball with Sakura rather than goad his protegee was disturbing, to say the least and oh screw this. His curiosity was insatiable and he was going nowhere until he figured it out! “Gotta’ ice my knee, Sakura. Although I’d be happy to help you pass the time whenever you want.” There. Just enough to keep his reputation as a ladies’ man
intact, but nothing to be taken seriously. Sakura didn’t even bat an eyelash at his offer, and had she been up to snuff, probably would have put her hands on her hips as she scolded him.

As it was, she responded with a halfhearted smile, and settled him into a chair at the kitchen table. She then procured a telephone book so that he could ice and elevate his knee. It was only then that she glanced over at the blue fireball. “Is this all right, Emperor-dono? Otherwise we can settle him more comfortably in the living room…”

Toki raised an eyebrow at her, and couldn’t help but look at the emperor as well.

When he did nothing but stare back at him impassively, Toki made to stand. Injured as he was, he wasn’t going to chance his rage.

“No, wait. You. You are the one who goes on about bro’ing.” Code:Emperor smiled, and even though he was a floating ball of fire the expression was smug. “You annoy him. I like that very much. You may stay.”

“Well I never. So much for trying to distract his heartbroken best friend. Well, Toki was certainly not going to do that ever again. He’d have to save his efforts for Yuuki, or perhaps for Rui if Kouji didn’t just man up already. “Thanks, I guess. I’d annoy him more, but he’s a little busy at the moment.” He stretched out over the table, aiming for nonchalance and succeeding, if he said so himself. “Actually, I’m a little surprised you guys aren’t down there watching him.”

“I don’t need to-”

“He asked me to-”

Both Code:Emperor and Sakura glanced at each other. Toki hid a smile as Code:Emperor nodded, indicating that Sakura could go first. Either chivalry wasn’t as dead as he’d thought, or the rare kind had won over even the battle-hardened Emperor, as well as his host. Either way, Toki was impressed.

“Ogami asked me to stay with him today. It’s his way of being kind...to both of us.”

Toki’s brow furrowed in confusion. When the silence stretched, he had no choice but to ask. “Being kind? To both of you?” And then, because flighty as he could be he was certainly no slouch, “One of the rare kind women from the story was Ogami’s mother, wasn’t she?”

Sakura sighed and her gaze flickered down to the floor. Toki thought he may have stepped on a landmine and his blood ran cold at the thought of comforting the rare kind. Yet after a moment she looked right back up and her eyes were dry. “Yes. What’s more, she - Rin - was the woman who raised us - well, not me so much, I was more with the scientists, but Ogami, I, Ai and even Mishiru, to an extent. This was when we were small. She...died during December 32nd. Actually, she was the woman that you once wrongfully accused Ogami of murdering. To see her again...it’s hard for all of us. That’s why he wants us to stick together.”

Toki nodded slowly, automatically murmuring his apologies. Yet even as he did so, his mind whirled. Something didn’t add up - while her explanation worked for herself and Ogami, why should Rin’s loss affect Code:Emperor? And he certainly was affected - this was proven not just by his current demeanor but also by Ogami’s words earlier this morning: he wants you. Why else would Code:Emperor want Sakura if he was not himself upset? And why would Ogami ask her to stay with him?

Toki harbored a suspicion, but he also knew that were he to voice it, he would likely find himself
on fire. In an effort to stay alive a little while longer, he changed the subject. “And have you heard from Bentou and Mishiru? Why aren’t they here?” There were others, of course, but Toki knew where they were. Hiyori and Shigure were keeping house and living a relatively normal life, although Hiyori still phased between her human and lost form somewhat erratically, and Shigure’s hold on his power had dwindled to nearly nothing. Still, they were able to care for Makoto, who had made leaps and bounds with his recovery, and was able to hold consciousness for several hours a day.

Another pair of their old friends, Aoba and Uesugi were in Africa, and undergoing a fairly accurate re-enactment of rabbits during mating season. That their non-powered childhood friend was also with them raised eyebrows, but as long as it kept Aoba from going on another power trip or kidnapping Sakura and tying her to a bed, no one was giving them a hard time.

Surprisingly enough it was Code:Emperor who answered Toki’s question. “The boy’s keeping her powers in check, and Shibuya decided it was probably best to keep it that way. Kids are practically useless without each other, now...especially since she took a turn for the worse.”

Toki had nearly forgotten about Mishiru’s episode two years ago, when Kagerou had threatened to break free once more. Luckily enough Bentou had been there to quell her power, and in an effort to keep her meltdown from happening again, they agreed to temporarily live together. Although Toki had never learned what had sparked Kagerou’s return, Yuuki had once made vague references to Ogami making another girl cry while on a post-mission drunken bender. The implications of that were enough to quell even Toki’s curiosity. Truthfully, he could only be surprised at Mishiru, thinking she had a chance of coming between Ogami and Sakura - even if they hadn’t interacted for four years. That, and feel sorry for Bentou, who had been forced to spend nearly every day with her since. “I can see her relying on him, but what does he need her for? I thought he was pretty anti-power user, to say the least.”

Code:Emperor’s expressions were limited, but Toki would swear the man...flame...thing looked uncomfortable. “Well…”

Sakura cut in, with a voice that was as brittle as old tinder. Her back was to him, however, so he couldn’t see her expression. “At the beginning it was fairly awkward, yes. And he certainly chafed at being tied to her. But that hasn’t been the case for a long time now. She calms him down, and he’s much, much happier than he used to be - all his rage that he’s carried since childhood is manageable, thanks to her.”

Comprehension dawned over Toki’s face, and he was helpless to stop it. “But...wait, you aren’t saying...they couldn’t possibly be-”

Sakura paused in her chopping, and turned around to face him. Her lips tightened into a painful smile. “Lovers? Yes, for the last several years.”

Toki knew he was sporting his most unflattering expression, but he simply couldn’t help it. “And no one has said anything? Heike just...lets them be together?”

“They decided that it was safer to keep them together than not. Mishiru was very close to losing control that time, and everyone worried about the damage she could cause were it to happen again. And by the time everyone realized that they were in love, Heike and Father worried that separating them would destroy Ai, and we’d have to deal with a variant of December 32nd all over again. So they take precautions, and live in a semi-quarantined location, and check in every few days. And that is that.”

Toki was dumbfounded. Largely because Sakura was reciting this with a detached air, as if it had
nothing to do with her...but also because he had been sure she wasn’t supposed to know anything about the power users’ world. Why else would he and the other Code:Breakers been forced to jump through flaming hoops simply to send her a damn text message? “How do you know all this? I thought you’d been living a normal life for the last six years!”

Her frosty expression thawed a little. “Of course I have been, but I am a rare kind. And believe me, by the third time you go small during your law lecture, you get a little sick of changing schools. So father and I meet once a week and have tea, and work on ways to keep from going small. If we take little breaks between our scientific studies to gossip, who could possibly blame us? Especially since we tend to talk about other rare kinds, like Ai. So no, we didn’t break any rules, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Toki grinned at their ingenuity. “You only gossip about other rare kinds, huh? What about your dad’s old students? Ever ask about them?”

Sakura’s smile was unfeigned for the first time since he had entered the room. “Of course! Checking up on his student’s skills is the best way to judge his skills as a teacher, after all.”

Well, call him a canned ham. Her unflinching honesty nearly had him fooled, but Sakura truly was Shibuya’s daughter. That sly smirk proved it. Yet Code:Emperor had been quiet throughout their last exchange, and Sakura noticed it as well.

“Emperor-dono? What is it?”

“The boy doesn’t know about them, does he?”

Neither Toki nor Sakura needed clarification on who the boy may be. Toki frowned. Wouldn’t Code:Emperor be the one best qualified to know that? He spent the remnants of his existence freeloading on Ogami’s arm, after all. Yet Sakura looked vaguely guilty, and that piqued Toki’s interest.

“Well...I think he does. At least...he might. Maybe. It is a distinct possibility.”

The men exchanged a look, yet it was Code:Emperor who forged onwards. “Sakura...”

Now she really did put her hands on her hips, and Toki had to bite back a grin. He loved it when women were feisty. “Oh, calm down both of you! It’s not like I up and told him, ok? I just...well, you know how he watches over me? I can kind of feel him sometimes. Or at least I think I can feel him. Or maybe it’s just that I can still smell him... Anyway, after Father told me about Ai and Mishiru I was a little upset, and I went home and threw a small hissy fit. I may have outlined the circumstances out loud, as well as exactly what I thought about it. But honestly I was so upset I could hardly think straight, and I can’t be sure exactly what I said. What I do know is that after I was done, I thought I felt Ogami’s presence...but I couldn’t be completely sure. And...well...if he knows, it’s probably because of that. Unless someone else told him, but I was under the impression that it was going to be kept a secret between them, Heike, Father and I.”

The brilliant lights of epiphany flashed before Toki’s eyes. “When was this, exactly?”

“Well as soon as it started, so...about two years ago?”

Holy hell. That lined up perfectly with Ogami’s vasectomy. Toki was willing to bet anything that not only had Ogami overheard, but that he had been swayed by whatever it was Sakura said. Yet he had ultimately not broken down and been with her... “I see. And you didn’t know anything about this, Code:Emperor?”
The blue fireball frowned. “No. But I don’t always accompany him when he stalks Sakura. And I can’t whenever he’s in his lost form. It likely could have happened during one of those times.”

Toki had to bite his tongue to keep from telling Sakura his suspicions. Yet Ogami would gut him if he did so, and as Toki had already stated, he had no interest in dying today. Besides, he had come close enough to skirting the line the other day, and he was pretty sure Ogami hadn’t yet forgiven him for that. Still, everyone in the damn mansion could see how it was killing them to keep apart from each other, even if everyone acknowledged the dangers of them. But if it had worked for Ai and Mishiru, why not Ogami and Sakura?

Toki couldn’t lie to himself. It was simple: Mishiru didn’t labor under Ogami’s protector complex, and all she wanted was a friend. Similarly, now that Eden had been taken down, Ai had nothing to do but be lonely. Just because their hermetic lifestyle worked for them didn’t mean it would work for either Sakura or Ogami, who managed to stumble into or make trouble every three days. Besides, Ogami would never forgive himself if he took away Sakura’s chance for a normal life...even if all she wanted was to be with him.

Toki watched Sakura as she continued cooking, murmuring quietly to Code:Emperor at her side. In his mind, he superimposed the image of Ogami standing behind her, teasing her; holding her; helping or hindering her cooking. Not for the first time, the unfairness of their existence bubbled up within him, burning his throat and the back of his eyes. Why should he be happy when they could not? Why had his fucking shithead of an old man denied not only their happiness, but all the rare kinds and their lovers?

When he had been young, he had lived for Nenene and his sole desire had been to protect her, even if they were miserable in the process. He had since learned how unfulfilling such an insular goal was. Thinking about his two friends and their unfair situation, he could feel such a goal forming within him once more. Yet this time, he didn’t want to fight to merely tear down the status quo.

He wanted to fight to make a change.

Chapter End Notes

I’m using the name Bentou-kun gave when he joined Ogami and Sakura’s class, way back when - Ai Ueo. Probably a fake name, but I kind of like it, so there!

... Once again, I apologize for the lateness of the update. I have a few chapters left in reserve, but the problem is that I moved things around, and got stuck halfway through chapters, and all is a mess now. But! Here is something to chew on. Hope you like it ^_^
Chapter Summary

First interlude in Code:Beginning Universe:

After a near breakdown, Mishiru takes refuge with the unlikeliest person imaginable - Ai Reo, the rare kind whose hatred for power users is unparalleled. Now, thanks to Shibuya's trickery, they're locked in a house together until - and this is entirely a matter of when - one or both of them breaks. Yet broken things are inevitably made whole again, and what comes from their opened eyes is a force to be reckoned with...

(Exact same as pre-published one shot, simply moved over to its proper place in the story to better facilitate tale.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

First Code:Shot - Ai and Mishiru

A Modern Love Story

Late Winter, 2016

Day 0 Hour 1

There was no one but herself that she could blame for trying. Yet Rei’s firm, kind refusal echoed in her head (I’m sorry, Mishiru. I can’t keep that old promise. Please find someone else. I want you to be happy-) until she thought she might go mad, and so she ran out into the rain, without shoes, without purpose, without hope. Why else was she alive if not for him? And how could she have allowed herself to taste this ambition that would inevitably lead to the bitterest despair?

It was so much worse for him, she knew. Loving Sakura this deeply even after four years absence, and knowing there would never be a chance to be together. The smallest part of her had hoped he might use her as a substitute, and she honestly had no expectation of him ever loving her for her own merits. All she wanted was to see him happy, and not suffocating under the guilt and pain of his lonely existence. Now, he would hold himself apart from her, and she wouldn’t see him at all.

Mishiru wept, tears mingling with rain, bare feet streaked with mud, gravel biting into the soft flesh of her feet. What was wrong with her? She had been doing well for so long...but then she had seen Rei again, and she had been overcome by that hopeless affection. Now what could she do? She couldn’t go back, because that was where failure lay. Perhaps if she could just-
Failure. Failure. Failure.

She shook her head violently, dislodging rain droplets like a shivering dog. The last thing she needed was for Kagerou to overtake her. That part of her psyche had been silent for over a year now. It must be trying to take advantage of her weakened state. But she had not become so weak - she was strong, she was capable, she was-

You are a failure. I am not. Give yourself to me and we shall watch the city burn, burn burn.

Mishiru reeled, clutching her head in panic. Something was wrong. Kagerou had not been this powerful since they had belonged to Eden. This was practically unbearable, and unless she got it under control, there was a terrifying and very real possibility that she would succumb. She breathed deeply, striving for calm, yet the insistent battering on the underside of her skull did not relent.

Want so much. Want it all to burn. Let me take what you can’t have. I could make him want us. I could burn his heart.

A wordless shriek ripped from her throat, and she hurled herself forward, racing blindly down streets she barely knew in an effort to escape from herself. No, she couldn’t allow herself to hurt anyone ever again - especially Rei! No matter how much she loved him, she could never force him against his will. Not even if the idea of doing so made her-

Mishiru slammed into someone taller and stronger than her, slipping backwards to fall on wet pavement. Yet even before she landed her mind cleared with an ethereal clarity, and Kagerou fell mercifully silent. Stunned, she peered upwards, protecting her eyes from the rain with a faltering hand.

"You." Ai Reo, the man that she had very nearly killed during her last day as the ex-Prime Minister’s slave loomed above her, glaring at her with both fire and frost in his expression. As she swallowed nervously she realized there was shadow too, spreading like wings from his shoulders...down his forearms...to his fingertips, reaching steadily for her. As his rare kind energy reached her, Kagerou and her flame were flooded, and for the first time in years she felt clean. Yet it was too much to withstand, and his dark energy suckled at her skin, leaching away her consciousness.

The last thing she knew before she surrendered to the rare kind and utter darkness was overwhelming relief. 

Day 1, Hour 4

Even before she opened her eyes Mishiru knew she had been moved indoors. There was a musty smell, like old, dusty libraries, and the faint patter of rain against a windowpane. Then, she remembered what had caused her to faint, and she bolted upright, not realizing she was lying on a bed until she nearly tumbled off of it.

“Take it easy, Mishiru. Don’t worry, you’re safe - and so is everyone else.” Shibuya - it could only be he, wearing that odd costume and totally unafraid of her power - patted her arm gently, just as he would his own daughter. Unwelcome guilt lanced through her, remembering her attempt at wooing Rei away from Sakura. Surely he wouldn’t know what she had attempted? Or, even if he did, wouldn’t he be in the best position to understand?
At the very least he didn’t seem to blame her, although she could only tell by the nuance of his voice. “It was a good thing that you ran into Bentou-kun when you did. Now, how are you feeling?”

Mishiru blinked at him in surprise, trying to make sense of her situation. "I..." She hesitated, taking stock of how she felt, and - fading guilt aside - was surprised at what she found. "I'm...ok, actually. I feel light. Good." She breathed deeply, glorying in the unexpected detente from her heartbreak and Kagerou's rage. Discreetly, she glanced around, yet she didn't recognize her surroundings. The room was bare, save for small, latticed windows on the wall to her left, and behind Shibuya there appeared to be a second cot bed, with someone laying in it.

“That’s good, dear. And, um, I’m always here if you need someone to talk-”

The body on the other bed was Ai. Mishiru shot out of the bed, clambering around Shibuya who sputtered in surprise. She didn’t stop until she was looking down at the unconscious young man. His face was pale, but his chest rose and fell with even, steady breaths, so she assumed ‘going small’ hadn’t been too detrimental. Clearly he had already been given the rare serum...yet there must be something still wrong with him, otherwise he wouldn’t be unconscious. She turned back to Shibuya with guilt written on her face. “Was it me? Is he like this because of me?”

The nyanmaru mask kept him maddeningly expressionless, but she could tell that he chose his words carefully. “Ai has been running himself ragged for some time, now, Mishiru-”

“But if I hadn’t lost control and he hadn’t stopped me, would he be ok?”

Shibuya sighed. “Well, he wouldn’t be unconscious. I wouldn’t say he’d be much better, however.”

Mishiru frowned and looked back down at Ai. He had always been an incredibly attractive young man, but his good looks were edged with the harshness of anger long buried, and purpose unattained. When he was sleeping, however, those edges were smoothed, and her attention was drawn to his long eyelashes, high cheekbones, and tousled hair. He was not nearly as frightening when unconscious, and it made her regret hurting him all the more. She trembled at the thought of killing him (again, almost, and it had been way too close the first time) and words came tumbling out with no pause for breath. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to lose control and I was fighting it as hard as I could, but I was just so upset and I didn’t know what to do or where to go and she almost got out-”

“Mishiru. Mishiru!” Shibuya interrupted her, steadying her with his costumed paws. “It’s all right. Bentou-kun is going to be fine. Actually, a rest is just what he needs and refuses to take, so in all honesty this is probably the best thing that could have happened to him. Besides, he lost control just as much as you did. In fact.” Shibuya cut off abruptly, glancing down at the boy on the bed. He paused for a long moment, deep in thought. “Actually,” he began again, and Mishiru could sense, if not see, the calculating expression behind the mask. “If it’s not too much to ask, would you be willing to help Bentou-kun?”

“Help him? Me?” It was not that she was averse to helping - craved it, in fact, after all the years of existing as a soulless, killing machine - but she couldn’t imagine Ai accepting her help. After all, he had waved off all her apologies and attempts to be helpful when he was recovering from the injuries she had inflicted on him six years ago. Seeing as how this was their first interaction since then, she didn’t see any reason for him to accept her help now. “I don’t think he’d let me...”

“He will if it’s not up to him, Mishiru. Let’s say...we tell him that you’re close to the brink, and he’s the only one to keep Kagerou from coming out to play. Add this to a natural recuperation period of, oh, say three months? I’ll tell him he’s got a rare kind illness that power users are
immune to, and elect you both to ‘nurse’ each other throughout your mutual quarantine. This way, he’ll get the rest he needs, and you’ll have a grace period to...come to terms with whatever it was that caused you to lose control in the first place, which I have no idea whatsoever what it could possibly be. I think it’s brilliant. What do you think?”

Mishiru adopted the bland, professional smile she tended to use on those she thought were insane. Disregarding the obvious admission that he knew enough of what had transpired between her and Rei, he wanted she and Ai to spend three months together? They wouldn’t survive three days! “So what happens when we inevitably fight? How do we stop the negation then?”

Shibuya patted her back fondly, chuckling underneath the mask. “Inevitable is too strong a word, my young friend. Of course, the easiest way to stop negation is simply not to fight at all. It will be a good test of fortitude. And here’s another bonus - think of this as a scientific experiment. If we can determine a safe way for rare kinds and power users to live together...think of how angry it would have made all those Eden scientists! Ahh, revenge is sweet. So, Mishiru? To the future?”

He had worked at the clasp of his helmet during his speech, and at the end held it aloft like a champagne flute at the close of a stirring toast. Mishiru smiled weakly, distracted by all he hadn’t said. More than sticking it to the scientists who had made her young life - as well as Ai’s, Rei’s, and Sakura’s - a hellish misery, discovering a way for rare kinds and power users to live together would benefit all those lovers separated by that divide - people like Sakura and Rei...and Shibuya and his ex-wife. The realization that she could help Shibuya turned her thoughts to the practical aspects of the study. “Where would we do this? It’d have to be someplace contained...in case of accidents. But close enough that you could check in on us.”

“The mansion is not the only piece of real estate that I own, Mishiru. I know just the place. Fortunately, you both are in it now even better, I’m the only one who knows the way out. I’m so glad you agreed, Mishiru. Now, one last thing: do you know how to cook?” He plowed onwards before she could do anything other than blink at him. “Excellent, Bentou-kun earned that nickname for a reason, you know. I’d start cooking now, so there’s something waiting for him when he wakes up. Might be a bit cranky, otherwise. Well then - I’ll be checking in on you in a few days, and to bring a fresh supply of groceries. Ta ta!”

Before she could protest, he stuck the helmet backwards on her, so for a moment she was blind. By the time she wrestled the thing off (by burning it off, and she forgave herself the use of her powers as she simply did not know what was going on) Shibuya was gone, and there was no sign in the room to mark his exit route. The door was 8 feet away, and firmly shut. That meant there was likely a trapdoor of some kind - and if she found it she could escape and tell him that she’d changed her mind, this was madness, and that she couldn’t possibly spend three months with someone who hated her - but just then Ai moaned. Her eyes flicked over to him, but he was still asleep. Yet his eyebrows had drawn together, and rather than the peaceful expression from earlier, his face was now contorted in pain. He was having a nightmare, no doubt. She did not wonder at its content. He was all that was left of his friends, and he’d watched them die not once, but twice. That dark dreams continued to haunt him six years after their deaths did not surprise her, as she was tortured by ghosts of her own.

Mishiru bit her lip. Perhaps Shibuya was right. Perhaps it was time that they stopped running, and turn to face their demons. There was also a certain logic in being locked up together. To her, he represented her time as a slave, both mentally and physically, and by helping him now she could absolve herself of some of her guilt, as well as affirming herself as a free woman. Likewise, everyone knew of Ai’s hatred for power users. If she could help him get over that - even just a little - then any aches and pains along the way would be worth it.
Wary yet determined, she trudged downstairs, hoping that Shibuya’s kitchen was well stocked.

Day 1, Hour 6

Mishiru was, by almost every account, an excellent cook. It had been one of the few things she was encouraged to do for herself when under Eden’s direction, and as such had taken to it like a starving man approaches the buffet table. She was pleased by Shibuya’s larder, but not surprised. If she didn’t know better, she would suspect that he’d had this experiment ready for longer than the few hours she assumed both she and Ai had been unconscious. Although when she thought about it, she had almost certainly entered her rare form when Ai had sucked her power out of her. That being the case, the whole situation made more sense. Rather than a few hours, he’d had over a day to prepare this situation, after taking advantage of her lost form - a coma-like state - and whatever was wrong with Ai.

She had no sooner plated the yakisoba and stirred the red miso to keep it fresh when she heard a click on the table behind her. The mirror helpfully placed above the sink reflected Ai’s thunderous expression, and the cell phone he had just laid down on the table.

“Didn’t take much to convince you, huh?”

Mishiru swallowed before answering, and hoped it was quiet enough for him to miss. “I didn’t have much of a choice. I expect he filled you in?”

“What got off the phone with him. You’ve gone crazy - again - and he expects me to deal with it. Rather than handle it in a rational manner, like setting up appointments, etc, he wants us to live together. For the foreseeable future.” His disdain was obvious.

“It’s only three months,” she protested. “And its not just for us. The experiment-”

“Fuck his experiment.” His voice was now directly above her, and Mishiru nearly dropped the ladle. How had she missed his movement? He had snuck up on her and loomed threateningly at her back. It would be so easy for him to wrap his hands around her neck and squeeze the life out of her. Judging by the palpable crackle of murderous intent, he would like nothing more.

Yet fear had never ruled Mishiru. She calmly laid down the ladle, biting back sudden, vivid daydreams of striking him upside the head with enough force to crack his skull. Instead she glanced up and over her shoulder, meeting his gaze and scoffing. She then slipped from where he’d trapped her and crossed her arms. “I understand you’re upset,” she began in her firmest tone, the one that she imagined had Kagerou at the edges. “But I understand what he’s trying to do, and more importantly, I understand why. Yes, I need help. And by the looks of it,” here, she let her eyes flick up and down over his gaunt frame, “you do too. You’re ill, Ai. That much is obvious.”

His eyes narrowed and he drew himself up to his full height, nearly a foot taller than her. “You’re in no place to be worrying about me, sweetheart. I can take care of myself, which is more than you can say.”

Mishiru shrugged, and hoped that her veneer of confidence would not crack. “Maybe, maybe not. But none of that is why I agreed. If we can figure out a way to make this work, then maybe Re- I mean, Shibuya and Sakurako-san can figure out a way to be together again. Even if it’s just a little bit, I’d like to help.” She had tried not to stumble over Rei’s name, and had decided too late that it was better not to have mentioned him at all. Ai’s expression flickered, and she was sure that his focused gaze missed nothing. “I’ve hurt so many people in the past. So if they need me now, I will
do whatever I can.”

There was a moment of charged silence. Mishiru became painfully aware of the faint, electric hum of the lamp above her head before Ai broke eye contact, swaggered over to the table and glanced down at the noodles. He swiped a finger through the sauce pooling at the edge and brought it to his mouth. Only after he made a show of sucking the sauce from his thumb did he respond. “You aren’t afraid of me? Of what I could do to you?”

He didn’t mention her fears of negation, and Mishiru was not surprised. His hatred of power users extended past the bounds of his common sense, and had he not hated Fujiwara Souri most of all, he might have agreed with the use of negation as a weapon. Now that Fujiwara had been dead for years, who knew where Ai stood? Still, Mishiru didn’t take kindly to threats, and although she was a naturally modest woman, she owned her experiences. She had been forced to live and breathe as Eden’s top operative, and that meant being prepared at every moment for attack, a knife in the back, and inevitable death. Ai was a paltry little bully, in comparison. For all his ruthlessness, he wasn’t even as strong as Sakura. “I’m afraid of many things, but you are not one of them.”

He held her gaze for a long moment before his lips twisted in a smile that did not reach his eyes. Then he pulled out a pair of chopsticks from his back pocket and captured a surprising amount of noodle between them. Cupping his free hand beneath the dangling yakisoba, he brought it to his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. “It’s decent,” he grudgingly admitted, and Mishiru didn’t realize she had been holding her breath until she let it out in a relieved woosh.

Maybe this could work after all.

**Day 5, Hour 22**

The first few days were tense and awkward, with both metaphorically kicking the walls that kept them imprisoned. After their first conversation Ai refused to talk further, and the only time he would break his self-imposed silence were at meal times, where they called an unspoken truce to discuss recipes and meal planning, and who would prepare the next meal. She was surprised to learn that he loved to cook as much as her, although in retrospect she shouldn’t have been. The bentous he perpetually carried had to come from somewhere, after all.

Besides that, however, matters between them only became more strained. After three days of being caged in, Mishiru thought she might just go insane. On the fourth, she eyed the kitchen knife and entertained fantasies of stabbing it into Ai’s flesh. On the fifth night, she slept long enough to dream of Rei, and that was when their uneasy peace came undone.

She woke gasping from a nightmare that encompassed Rei blindfolded and tied to the bed by chains of fire, fighting against the constraints. Yet he moaned as she whipped him with a leather belt. She’d licked along the red, upraised welts, but most delicious to her was the sense of power, and of control. The thought of Rei as her sexual prisoner was intoxicating, and it was her orgasm that woke her, rather than realization and horror.

When she woke there was flame flickering around the edge of her vision, and Kagerou was a heavy sweetness in her pulse. Sexual desire and the urge to destroy walked hand in hand with Kagerou, and she was just as close now to giving in as she had been barely a week ago. With the last vestiges of restraint she tumbled out of the bed and ran down the hall to Ai’s room. Yet once there she couldn’t force her fist to the door so she threw herself against it, landing in a heap on the floor. She
called out for him once, and prayed that it would be enough.

For once, her prayers were answered. The door flew open, and the last thing she saw before Kagerou’s dark mask settled into place were his eyes, flaring with an unidentifiable emotion. Then there was nothing except for Kagerou, and the dark.

Day 6, Hour 9

Mishiru awoke the next morning in living room, lying on the floor next to the half-charred sofa. Within reach was her Kagerou mask, broken neatly in half. Like she had after her last run in with Ai, her mind and body felt light and focused, and Kagerou was silent, sleeping deep down inside of her. Yet unlike their last encounter, this time she panicked immediately. Where was Ai? Had she hurt him? Or more embarrassingly, had she acted on the unnatural lust that drove her dreams? Ai was a handsome man, and she knew Kagerou wasn’t picky - it was only that which made her Mishiru that made her fall in love with Rei. She strained her memories, but nothing came to the fore. It was like this sometimes, especially on the few occasions Kagerou was defeated. Ashamed at its defeat, it hid all knowledge of that encounter from her, never minding that Mishiru could learn of the encounter from anyone who had survived. Such would be the case now, and with a sigh she pulled herself out from under the couch, praying that she hadn’t managed to hurt Ai too badly.

She had mentally prepared herself to find him bloody and battered (and the more her fears progressed the bloodier he was...or tied down to a bed) but she was not prepared to find him casually making breakfast in the kitchen.

For a moment she couldn’t move, her brain stalling under the effort of piecing together the wreckage in the living room, bathroom, and hallway with the oasis of calm in the kitchen. Yet then her eyes settled on his the way his shirt bunched at the left shoulder, underneath the apron he took no shame in wearing whenever it was his turn to cook. Shirts didn’t bunch like that normally, she decided, and waited for the pan to sizzle before making her move.

With a leap forward and a quick tug, the shirt draped halfway down his arm, and the split material revealed a long, wicked scar that traveled from the top of his shoulder, down his shoulder blade, ceasing at the top rib. She inhaled quickly and several images flashed before her eyes: gaining the advantage, forcing him facedown into the floor as she straddled him, and then raking downwards with the exact same kitchen knife she had fantasized about using on the fourth day.

When the images cleared she looked up into Ai’s impassive face and let go of his shirt. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, even more frightened now than she had woken up. She had been wet with arousal as she had attacked him, and was terrified that he would somehow recognize the desire underneath the violence. “I don’t remember what I - oh god, Ai, I really-”

He shrugged that shoulder and broke eye contact with her, glancing behind him. “If you want to apologize, go clean the living room. Open those special vents Shibuya installed and burn that shit up.”

Mishiru blinked. “But-”

He arched one eyebrow. “Oh, are you not sorry?”

She swallowed thickly. This was not how she had imagined this conversation to go. It was so far from the bounds of her expectations that she simply could not comprehend it. “But aren’t you
angry? Aren’t you frightened?”

Ai laid down the ladle yet never broke eye contact. “Why should I be? I knew what you were going into this. You took me a little by surprise this time, but don’t think that’s ever going to happen again. I’ve got your number now, sweetheart.” He turned back to the stew, bubbling away in the pot. Mishiru took a deep breath and held it, and wondered if she really had gone mad during day three, and all this was just a figment of her imagination. No one had ever treated her alter ego with so little concern. Even Rei and Sakura had treated Kagerou as a worthy adversary!

She had just reached the door when Ai uttered his parting shot. “Oh, and tell Kagerou to try a little harder, next time.” He chuckled darkly as he pulled his sleeve back up, bunching it up under the apron. “Hell, I didn’t even need a safe word. I’m a little disappointed.”

Mishiru could no sooner stop the warm blossom of respect that took root in her heart than she could fly. All she could do was listen to the escalating beat of her heart as she slipped into the living room.

Day 9, Hour 14

Although the door to the real world is hidden, there is a greenhouse on the property, and from there she can see the sky. Mishiru is unfamiliar with every flower in the greenhouse, and Shibuya told her at their first meeting that they were flowers from his homeland that require specific gradients of light, and therefore grow nowhere else on earth. The tinted glass is nearly a foot thick and the myriad, reflecting colors let in only a quarter of the light that they should, so the exotic flowers are heated by portable UV ray lamps that Ai once observed looked like giant penises. Mishiru was fairly sure that such an observation was more common for boys of 12, not 22, and had told him so. He had merely shrugged and walked off, but not before raising an eyebrow at her, as if to imply she was the immature one, here.

Shibuya always meets with her in the greenhouse, when they have their bi-weekly discussions on how things are going. She had been guilty when she told them about fighting less than a week in, but he had nodded, unsurprised. Apparently he was not so naive as to believe that they could get along without quarreling. For some reason, that made her feel worse.

When not listening to her reports of their occasional disputes - and all had paled in comparison to the first, as Kagerou had been surprisingly quiet since then - he asks her about everything and nothing; random questions that she cannot see the connection between: what was Ai’s favorite food? Had she spoken to any of the (other) Code:Breakers lately? What does she do all day? Was Ai always that grouchy, or was he just unhappy to see anyone intruding on his idyllic vacation?

Although she felt somewhat guilty talking about Ai - feeling, somewhat accurately, as if she were spying on him - Mishiru felt only slightly more confident answering about herself. Yet these particular questions were easy to answer. She had not kept in contact with anyone outside of the house, nor, in the light of her recent heartbreak, did she wish to. In terms of daily schedule, she had learned early on the importance of a daily schedule to keep herself sane. Before, she had school and intensive physical conditioning, and in her spare time she would cook, people watch, and sketch. Now, she kept up her training regimen as best she could, and found herself cooking at least 2 hours every day to keep up with Ai’s rapacious appetite, but there was too much time left over. So she’d
spend hours in the library, and when she could read no more she would take to drawing and caring for the plants.

Shibuya had nodded knowingly, suggested she take to the internet for some yoga instruction, and changed the subject. She had let him, swallowing down a frisson of gilt. What she had not told him was this: plants were not people. There were no expressions to decipher, no challenge in remaining unseen. In lieu of this she took to sketching Ai, and by the end of the first week she had filled half a sketchbook with covert images of him.

(Due to this, she knows that he is never as handsome as when he sleeps, although she only has that one instance to judge by. His features are well-formed and bordering on aristocratic, yet there is something unpleasant in his expression that makes him, for all his physical perfection, less attractive than Rei. Perhaps it is his sullen demeanor, or the flash of arrogance when she disagrees with him. More likely, it is the loneliness that surrounds him like a second skin, all the more hateful for its familiarity.)

This stolen knowledge of him makes it harder to dislike him, and there are times when she feels as if doing so might be her last line of defense. She has never spent so much time with someone before, even though they only come together for meals. What will she become if she allows herself to empathize with him? Even more chillingly, what can she do if they are truly no different at all?

**Day 12, Hour 3**

When she thinks about Ai for too long, Mishiru despairs for Shibuya’s experiment, knowing deep down that only failure can come of this. Yet she does not know how to give up, and so she cooks, she reads, she talks to the plants, and she draws Ai’s face.

**Day - 16, Hour 21**

Ai had been in a bad mood all day, and so Mishiru finds refuge in the greenhouse, sitting and thinking about the questions Shibuya never asks. *Why haven’t you tried to escape? Why don’t you just leave?*

Although the walls of the house are lined with his blood, the glass in the greenhouse is not, and it would be child’s play to melt it and leave. Yet then the flowers -exposed to the outside world and natural light for the first time in their short lives - might sicken and die, and destroying innocents, whether sentient or not, does not appeal to her. So she sits and stews, and thinks black thoughts about the boy sharing her exile.

Only towards the close of the day does she wonder how Ai - unhampered by the rare blood in the walls - would answer that particular question.
The fight sprang from nothing; bad weather and strained tempers coalescing into a blazing row that Mishiru lost control of at the outset. For once she could not blame Kagerou. Ai had made a cutting remark about her obsession with sketching, and the next thing she knew she had hurled one of the kitchen chairs at him. He had stared at her in surprise, eyebrows up at his hairline, barely reacting to the chair as it barked off his hip. Yet before Mishiru could regret her impetuous action battle was joined and he streaked toward her, intent on catching her before Kagerou surfaced.

Yet Kagerou didn’t surface, and neither did her rage subside. All their little quibbles and attitude bubbled to the surface, along with her own dissatisfaction and helplessness. She screamed into his face and fought him hand to hand, and by the time they had fought their way back to the living room, she had gained a small measure of coherency.

“I hate you. I hate you. I hate you!” She growls as she claws at his chest, too wild and skilled to be contained by his superior strength and speed. She rakes her nails through his shirt and later she will wonder at her desperation, but for now all she feels is the satisfaction that destruction brings.

Ai’s response is punctuated with grunts as he fights her off. “You think I like being stuck here with you, sweetheart?” His fist slices through the air, aiming for her midsection, and it is a lucky hit. She folds forward, hoping to lull him closer, but he’s too careful. He manages to hoist her arms up and juts his hip against her midsection, lessening the chance of her kneeing him in the groin.

Mishiru spits towards his face, but misses. “You hate all the power users. All I hate is you!” It’s not exactly what she means to say, but it’s close enough. Ai catches her meaning easily enough, she can tell by his humorless smile as he turns toward her.

“That’s not true. I hate you very differently than the way I hate all the other power users. I hate you exactly the same way that I hate myself.”

The startling statement hangs in the air for a moment, stunning Mishiru before she realizes that was its purpose. Ai spins her around before she can fight back, pressing her face against the wall, and himself flush against her back. She bucks back hoping to dislodge him but it was no use. She was trapped, powerless to do anything other than listen to him as he continued.

“You know, I’ve learned something in the past couple weeks. Not that you’re dangerous - oh no, I knew that quite well before. Neither is it that you are hopelessly in love with Rei. No, what I’ve learned is that as big and bad as Kagerou is, you are even worse.”

Mishiru stills, and Kagerou pulses in her blood like a chuckle. She is stunned, both by Ai’s verbosity - she’s never heard him speak this much at any one time - and that he finds her dangerous. “Wh- what do you mean?”

He shifts and the pain thrumming through her arms lessens, although she still can’t fight her way free. She tells herself that she’s only distracted by his attempts at conversation, and that she has to listen now to tell Shibuya later. She is absolutely not half dizzy from the warmth of him against her back, nor his looming, blatant masculinity when he holds her like this.

“Oh, I think you know exactly what I mean. Everyone acts like Kagerou is the scary alternate psyche that you have to bury deep down...but that’s a lie, isn’t it? You pretend that Mishiru is the good guy, the smiling mask that everyone can trust. But I know the truth.” He leaned in close so that she could feel his breath on her neck, his words dripping like sweet poison in her ear.

“Kagerou is just another word for Mishiru, after all. No matter how you try to hide it, they are exactly the same thing.”
A lifetime of fears and hateful truths swamped her, and she couldn’t breathe. No, it couldn’t be true. If it were so then all the effort she had made towards being a sane and healthy individual meant nothing at all, as she could never be rid of the part of her that delighted in devastation. She stillled against him, mind whirling with a thousand recollections of destruction and the dark pleasure that came hand in hand. Desperately, she attempted to rationalize. She had been owned by Eden for so long...so much of it wasn’t her choice! And she had mourned it all! And besides, a little pyromania was normal when magical fire was as necessary to you as breathing, right?

“No, you’re wrong.”

“Am I? Let me put it to you this way, sweetheart. I’ve seen you in action. I know. You get off on it - all that pain, the violence…it turns you the fuck on. Don’t even try to deny it. Shit, you make other people hot just watching you. And before you try to say that’s all Kagerou, that sweet little Mishiru has nothing to do with all that, let me tell you about a rare kind’s sense of smell. You must think about hurting Rei quite a bit, sweetheart, ‘cuz I can smell your arousal every single day.”

Mishiru’s mind went utterly, blissfully blank. Later, there would be panic and shame that Ai had managed to learn her deepest, darkest secret with what appeared to be minimal amounts of effort. Now, there was only this blessed stillness and underneath it, the need to turn this back on him and to hurt him in return. Without speaking, she relaxed every bone in her body, practically melting into the wall. When he moved forward to block her attack she made her move. She arched her back, pushing her hips back and to the right, sliding along his leg until she reached what she had assumed (hoped) would be there: the sizable erection that would be her way out of this terrible situation. Her hopes were answered and her eyes fluttered shut (in relief, and relief only, and not to glory in the simmering heat in her womb) and she pressed firmly against it, caught between setting her entire body aflame in a last-ditch attempt to get away, and wiggling her bottom oh so slowly against him.

Ai, of course, had been right. Every day since Rei had denied her she had forced down tantalizing images of him as her sexual prisoner, but this? This was control of a different sort, control that could actually happen, and knowing that he could smell the trickling heat between her thighs only augmented the experience.

“Tell me something, Ai,” she whispered, her voice unintentionally low and throaty. The effect would have brought a lesser man to his knees. “If I’m such a monster, then what are you?” Swallowing thickly - and hoping he couldn’t somehow hear her heart pounding against her ribcage - she pushed against the wall, leaning back so their bodies were fully aligned. Ai remained still as stone behind her and only the minute hitch in his breathing signaled any concern in this unexpected turn of events. “If I’m a goddamn sexual deviant, what does that make you?”

After a long moment, his arms swung down from the wall, falling to his sides. Now that she was no longer trapped, she slowly turned and hoped that this veneer of calm would last through her parting shot. She kept her chin down but looked up through her eyelashes, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of having to angle her head up to look at him. “You liked that a little too much, sweetheart. Maybe the next time you look for a monster, you should try looking in a mirror.”

She walked away without looking back, and hoped that that he couldn’t see how her shoulders trembled as she went.
The night of The Altercation, as Mishiru took to considering it, she barricaded herself into her bedroom, for both her protection and his. She did not come down for dinner, and neither did he call her down. It appeared as if a ceasefire had been called, but she didn’t want to test it - what if he was simply waiting for her to walk down to the kitchen before he opened up with another salvo? The first attack had been devastating, and Mishiru could imagine hundreds of follow-ups that could push her over the edge. He wouldn’t even have to lie to break her - somehow, he had managed to learn exactly who she was after three weeks, when all he should know about her was her favorite meals and genre of literature. And to have learned something so private, that could be used to such devastation...Mishiru hunkered down beneath her blanket and felt an awful lot like crying. *I hate him, I hate him,* she whispered to herself, until she finally dozed off mid-sentence.

She dreamt of Kagerou, as she often had during her pre-pubescent years. Kagerou had not yet revealed herself to be cruel, and Mishiru herself had barely been more than a slip of a girl. She would retreat to this inner sanctum after particularly harsh missions when she was forced to question her humanity. Here, Kagerou would support her, bracing her against atrocities she had herself committed by reassuring her with false sympathy. *It’s all right, kitten; nothing is your fault; you’re such a good girl for doing as you were told…*

Yet tonight was only a mockery of such times. Kagerou lounged by a pool of clear water, the only distinct landmark amongst the fog of her dream. She cupped her hand in the pool and the water dappled her skin before sliding down the bare planes, curling down around the naked curves. Such was the nature of the dream that Mishiru was not ashamed at Kagerou’s provocative display, rather, she was hyper focused on the feel of water slipping down her own skin.

They had always been connected, for better or for worse. There was no more denying it, whether in this dreamscape, or in her waking moments.

“It seems that someone has had an exciting day, kitten. Have you come here to talk? Or to unwind?” Kagerou’s voice was smooth as silk yet its inflection matched her twisted intent. It was a mockery of Mishiru’s own voice, and Mishiru heard Kagerou’s tones every time she listened to a recording of her own. It was the reason why Kagerou never spoke in her waking moments, choosing to communicate by paper strands. It was as Ai had discovered: Mishiru and Kagerou were one and the same, and their voice revealed them as such.

Mishiru grit her teeth, choosing to focus on Kagerou’s pale, moon-like face, as inexpressive as the mask she hid behind. *“You called me here. What do you want?”*

Kagerou giggled before dragging her fingertips against her ribcage, just below her full breasts. “Oh, you know *exactly* what I want. But in the interest of your foolish modesty, I will prevaricate with a question. My darling Mishiru, why aren’t you fucking that boy?”

Her question was accompanied by a mental image of Mishiru riding Ai, her hips snapping tightly against his, her head thrown back and face lit with pleasure. The unexpectedness of it made her choke on her shocked inhale yet even as she coughed she couldn’t unsee the desperate need on his face. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined Rei with that sort of expression. How, then, was it so easy to imagine bringing Ai to the brink?
“Ka- you can’t just - that’s rape and-”

“Hard to rape the willing, kitten.”

Mishiru flushed fire truck red. “He’s not willing!”

Kagerou leered knowingly. “Today’s little interlude aside, he certainly didn’t seem unwilling when we had our little dance a few weeks ago…”

Mishiru’s breath caught in her throat. The only memory she had of when Kagerou took over was of slicing Ai’s back with a kitchen cleaver. There was no way he could have been turned on by that. Kagerou had to be lying.

“No, you’re wrong. He wouldn’t-” She froze, suddenly remembering that Ai had told her the next day in the kitchen: I didn’t even need a safe word. At the time she assumed that he had been joking, but what if he hadn’t? Her eyes widened as the possibility took hold of her, and all at once heat flushed through her. Oh god, wasn’t that exactly what she had accused him of? No wonder he had let her go after she’d implied he was more a monster than her - she liked hurting, but if he liked being hurt…? No, it couldn’t be true. This had to be an elaborate scheme, or Kagerou fucking with her mind, once again...

But oh god, what did it mean if Ai liked their fights? What did it mean if she liked that?

“I’ll be honest with you, kitten. I like that boy. So tall and strong and handsome...with such fascinating reactions to pain. I want him, and unless I am very mistaken, he is absolutely not adverse to the prospect. All that remains, kitten, is how you feel about the boy.”

Mishiru began shaking her head before Kagerou finished speaking. “No, no. No. This is not happening. You are not...matchmaking me with...with him! No. I hate him! Besides,” she breathed deeply to regain herself, as it was possible to lose control of Kagerou within her dreams, as she well knew, “I am in love with Rei. Rei. Ai is not a stand-in!”

Kagerou leaned forward, cupping her hand in the pool before bringing it to her breast. Water trickled through her fingers, coating her erect nipples, one by one. “And is Rei what you want or what you need? Or don’t you know the difference?”

“I love Rei for a reason!”

“And that reason is…?”

Thoughts of Rei flew through her head, yet none of them were the definitive reason for why she had fallen in love with him. Her feelings for Rei were strong but abstract, and she stumbled trying to describe the root of her feelings for him. “Well, he...he was there for me. When I needed him.”

“The marriage proposal, you mean.”

“No! It was because he was my friend!” And because we would never be able to destroy him.

“And are you so desperate that you’d fall in love with the first boy who smiled at you? Ha! Silly me, you’re even more desperate than that. And I would know, wouldn’t I?” Kagerou’s lips curled in a grin, yet her eyes remained as cold and lifeless as stones. “I will tell you a truth about us, kitten. We need to be needed. This is because we are oh so painfully lonely. So while we love Rei because he doesn’t need us, we need Ai because he does.”

“He doesn’t need us,” Mishiru whispered, knowing that twisted as Kagerou was, she never lied.
“He hates us.”

Kagerou tilted her head back and laughed. “Oh, kitten. That boy is even lonelier than us, and that is saying something. Every time he gets close to someone, they die...but we wouldn’t, and he knows that now. If we let him, he would love us endlessly...and what’s more, he could even learn to love us equally. Could Rei ever do that? Could Rei ever give you anything other than the cold ashes of unfulfilled dreams?”

The incarnation of her power stood and walked sinuously towards her. Images overwhelmed her: Ai below her, bound and blindfolded, whispering both their names in tones of utter devotion; laughing and smiling with her over the dinner table; teasing her about her secret penchant for romance novels; his weight pushing her into the mattress as he slept, deeply and trusting. Every facet of Kagerou’s dreams were exquisite, and unlike her dreams about Rei, they were based in reality. Was it the potential of fulfillment that gave those dreams that special sheen? Or was it something about Ai that made her long to see them fulfilled?

Kagerou had reached her by now, and wrapped her arms around her, so that they stood face to face, mirror images of opposite intents. She leaned in close to whisper in Mishiru’s ear, and both their eyes fluttered shut as she did. “You’d never have to worry about destroying him. You could hurt him, break his heart, set him aflame...but he’s lived through far, far worse. Even I couldn’t break him, kitten. Especially now that he knows the truth: you are me...and I am you. So let me tell you one more time: I want him. Do you know what that means, Mishiru?”

Knowledge swept through her like a strong wind, signaling her utter capitulation. Her response was a sigh, barely more than the quietest exhale. “Yes.”

“Tell me, kitten.”

“I want him too.”

**Day 23 Hour 5**

Mishiru woke before the sun rose the next morning, and for a long moment lay in bed deciding what she needed to do. It all boiled down to three options. One, to escape out the greenhouse, and apologize to Shibuya for being unable to finish the experiment. That way, she could disappear to an uncharted island, and in her seclusion build up her emotional walls until she was just as strong and lonely as she could ever be.

Mishiru rolled over. The second option was that she could knock down the door to Ai’s room, demand that he take her virginity, and subsequently become her and Kagerou’s sex slave. While both options gave her pause - and the second made both her pulse race and her cheeks flush with shame as her mind flew through all the fascinating permutations of the sinful act - it only took a minute or two to decide on the third option: to continue with the experiment, say nothing provocative to Ai throughout the remainder of their time together, and continue to deny the fruition of both Kagerou’s and her (newly discovered) desires.

Kagerou didn’t like that choice, but there was far too much that could go wrong. More importantly, Mishiru knew the difference between lust and love, and after going through life in search of one, she was not immediately prepared to throw off such ideals for the promise of the other. Kagerou would just have to wait a little. After this she would get in touch with her desires...but not with Rei,
nor with Ai. Or at least not in this situation, where she and he were veritable prisoners. It wouldn’t be honorable, or right, or Mishiru. Kagerou grudgingly assented, but she simmered just below the surface, and Mishiru knew that if given the opportunity, she would absolutely attempt to sway her further.

That being largely settled, she slipped down to the kitchen, moving more quickly than she normally would. She wanted to beat Ai to breakfast, as preparing the meal was the only peace offering she could think of. She was irrationally pleased, therefore, when the omurice was halfway completed by the time she suddenly became aware of him at the doorway to the kitchen, standing still and silent and quite obviously staring at her. Glancing over her shoulder, she gestured to the table with her ladle.

“Breakfast will be ready in a couple minutes. Would you like to take a seat?”

Her head was turned just enough that she could hold his unwavering gaze from the edge of hers, and the moment stretched on, painfully. Yet she wouldn’t look away until he did, for she was just as much at fault as he. It was a profound relief when he moved towards the table, stepping momentarily out of her vision. She glanced back down at the pan, wondering if her heart would beat this loudly every time he entered the room for the rest of her life.

“What are we having?”

Mishiru tensed. His sense of smell, as he had assured her, was legendary, and omurice was one of his favorite meals. He had to know exactly what she was preparing. Was this some odd form of a test? Or was this his version of the olive branch? Taking a chance, Mishiru replied, “Omurice. Ah, actually - would you get the ketchup out of the fridge? Then I can prepare the plates here.”

He didn’t respond, but a moment later she heard the refrigerator door open, then the sounds of Ai rummaging about, locating the ketchup. There was a cool draft of air at her back that was abruptly replaced by Ai - his sudden proximity bringing warmth, the smell of his spicy soap, and the bone-deep desire to touch him that nearly made her drop the spatula. He was directly behind her, nearly close enough to touch her...but he didn’t. Instead, he placed the ketchup close to her right hand, leaned in infinitesimally closer to sniff at the omurice...then calmly walked back to the table, ignoring Mishiru’s red cheeks and jumping pulse.

She could do this, she assured herself as she plated their breakfast and brought it over to the table. After all, he wasn’t that handsome. Her resolve held until she placed his meal in front of him, and he glanced up with that look in his eye that meant he was exceptionally pleased with both the food itself, and its portions. It was the look that had always made something in her stomach swoop, and now she knew what it meant.

Ok, so she was perhaps a little doomed. That didn’t mean she was going to give up, however. She tucked in grimly, nobly ignoring his little hum of pleasure when he took his first bite.

She could do this. He was just a man.

Day 26, Hour 17

It took three days for their strained peace to break, but when it did, it was spectacular. They were
only a few days away from the one month mark, and Mishiru had crossed off yet another day on her calendar, allowing herself a small smile as she did. Disregarding the nigh overwhelming attraction she felt for her housemate, things were going well. They had even sat together in the library for over an hour last evening, absorbed in their own books, but in friendly silence, nonetheless.

Yet today was already a bit strained, as Ai had walked in on her and Shibuya’s meeting. The conversation was largely over, but it had been just as Shibuya had handed her a fresh packet of medicine, and Ai’s attention had narrowed in on the innocuous pouch. Mishiru had blushed, nervous about explaining exactly what it was - another month’s worth of Eden’s contraceptive and menstrual cycle regulator - when she had realized how it might look, and guilt over wanting to use the pill for its primary social connotation. Yet her weakness left as quickly as it came, and her determined expression must have told him quite a different story. His eyes had narrowed and he’d left the room abruptly, not even acknowledging Shibuya’s quiet hello.

Their benefactor had watched them with an unchanging fascinated expression, and Mishiru didn’t want to know what he was thinking. He had looked at her quite thoughtfully after Ai had left the room, before shaking his head and murmuring under his breath, “If only Aya could see him now...”

Mishiru doubted she was supposed to have heard that, but wondered who he was referring to - himself, or Ai. She wondered about it all day leading up until dinner. Was it a woman Ai knew? Their names were similar...could it be a sibling? She had never known anything about his family, save that he, like her, was an orphan when he came to Eden. Probably not a family member, then. Perhaps it was a girlfriend...or the reason for his unexplained illness. Shibuya had never claimed his illness to be physical, after all. And he could be correct in saying that there was no way this “malady” would spread to her, just as Ai would likewise be immune from her heartsickness over Rei.

Mishiru didn’t like that possibility. She liked it even less when she realized she was jealous of this mystery woman. She, who hadn’t even been jealous of Sakura! Yet that could be explained, she assured herself. Sakura was her friend, and had forgiven her for all her atrocities, as well as standing by her during her darkest hour. For that, Mishiru loved her nearly as much as she loved Rei, and made it impossible to be jealous of her. This left only the mysterious Aya to take the brunt of her irrational jealousy.

The disaster might have been averted had she been the one cooking that evening - cooking always tended to utterly absorb her - but it was Ai’s night, and halfway through their dinner of chicken piccata with wild rice and steamed broccoli (they both favored Eastern cuisine, but Shibuya had bought the ingredients for them and both had expressed a willingness to experiment) her curiosity finally got the better of her. She looked up, and asked the simple question with such far reaching consequences. “Who is Aya?”

Ai’s cup clattered as he set it down, and it took her a minute to realize that meant he had nearly dropped it. “Excuse me?”

His expression was dark, and it caused the first tendrils of unease trickled down her spine. Still some mixture of curiosity and jealousy prompted her to continue. “Is she the reason you’re here?”

One moment he was glaring at her from across the table, and the next he was gone. Had Mishiru not been so finely tuned to her immediate surroundings, she wouldn’t have felt the faint puff of air as he streaked past her. For a moment she did not follow, stunned and a little guilty. Yet then her jealousy swamped her, and with it came a sense of fair play. He knew all about her feelings for Rei. Why were his feeling for this Aya off limits?
She took off after him before she could examine her feelings more closely, and realize what her irrationality meant in terms of her feelings for him. It took her longer than she'd expected to find him, but he had never favored the greenhouse. Yet here he now was, shoulders rigid and fists clenched, staring out the foggy glass. It was nearly full dark, yet the gloom was punctuated by flashes of lightning, courtesy of the raging storm outside. His stance grew even more stiff as she entered the room, and this somehow made her even more upset. Previous experience dictated that she should engage him in a no-holds-barred fight, but her last inch of prudence held her back. It would be too easy to surrender to Kagerou if she did that...and her desire.

“Ai-”

“Don’t.” His voice was clipped, terse, yet not nearly authoritative enough. Embers lit in her belly when she thought about all the way she could make his protest utterly meaningless. “She’s not a part of this experiment. Just let it go.”

“Oh, and Rei is?”

“I said to let it go!” In a fit of temper, Ai ripped one of the UV lamps off the wall and threw it clean through the glass. Mishiru paled. The glass was over a foot thick, and the UV lamps shouldn’t be that strong… What force had he needed to expend to break the former without the latter merely shattering into a thousand pieces on the floor? That more than anything drove home her mistake. No matter who Aya was (is?) she should have said nothing at all.

Rain lined the floor, causing the thick shards of glass to glint. The blustery wind tore through the greenhouse, and the plants that Mishiru had painstakingly drawn were buffeted and torn. Yet she could not look away from Ai, who, having been closest to the point of impact, was bleeding from a thousand little cuts that glittered as he shook loose the shards from his skin. Mishiru swallowed, eyes wide. Her gaze was drawn in particular to the line of blood dripping slowly down his throat, coming from a gash on the underside of his chin. Aya no longer mattered. She wanted to step close to him and drag her tongue up the long line of his throat, lapping up the blood until she reached his lips. And then...and then...

His sharp intake of breath interrupted her fantasy, and too late she remembered that he could sense her arousal. Fleeting shame immobilized her before she realized it was silly - he already knew what she wanted...she already knew what she wanted...there was no use hiding from it. If Kagerou was right and he wanted her, even just a little, she would try. Even if she was wrong and he shot her down, it couldn’t be worse than Rei’s rejection.

 Couldn’t it? You’ve never been half so close to Rei. Ai’s rejection would haunt you forever - every time you cook, every time you sketch, every time you fight, every time you lay awake at night, resisting the urge to touch yourself...

Mishiru shook her head, not in denial of Kagerou’s argument, but to clear her mind. It was hard enough to focus when he was still just standing there, dripping blood onto the laminated floor, and watching her with a dark, unwavering gaze. She took a small step forward, swallowing nervously. If he didn’t want this, wouldn’t he say something? Run? Fight? Yet he did none of those things, and she was emboldened. So she took another step and it was then that Rei fell to the floor, folding inwards like a poorly constructed house of cards.

Mishiru froze. Panic clamored against the insides of her skull. There was another explanation for his immobility, she belatedly realized, and it was serious injury. Had the glass clipped his neck? Embedded itself into his brain? Surely, it wasn’t possible for someone to be allergic to glass, was it? Either way, she had to help him. She sank to her knees in front of him, disregarding the shards of glass that lodged themselves into the denim of her jeans. She had barely managed to hoist him
back to a sitting position before his eyes opened. Their expression was vague and unfixed, and the lack of awareness they displayed nearly made her drop him.

“Hey there, pretty lady.”

That really did make Mishiru drop him. Thankfully, Ai fell backwards, catching against the greenhouse’s back wall. He winced before smiling broadly. “Now, now, pretty lady. Gotta’ play nice with me. At least until we get to the bed.”

Mishiru gaped. Even more unsettling than what he was saying (and just what had happened to the sarcastic ‘sweetheart?’) was that he was smiling. It was a wide, sincere, uncomplicated smile, as if he were truly happy to see her and reference her overwhelming lust for him. It was this smile that made her mind stall.

Ai continued blithely in the face of her astonishment. “Unless you don’t want me anymore? Mmmm, but I think you do. At least, I hope you do. I think we’re right up each other’s alleys, pretty lady. If you weren’t so in love with Rei you’d probably see that too.” His brow furrowed but it smoothed over almost immediately, like a cloud in a quickly passing storm. “Everyone’s in love with Rei,” he muttered. “I may be missing out on something here…”

Drunk. He was somehow in the later stages of intoxication when the only alcohol in the house was the dregs of a bottle of cooking sherry. Her mind was still only functioning at half speed because rather than provide her with the answer to this mystery - and there was one, she knew there was a reason for this - instead it supplied her with, “But what about Aya?”

His head fell to the side and it nearly caused him to topple over. “My mom? Well I guess she would want grandchildren, but we’re young. We have options. We might not even like each other outside of the bedroom…and the kitchen…and all the places where we fight.” Ai nodded to himself, sagely and slightly off center. “I think we should cross that bridge when we come to it, pretty lady. First things first. Do you like me?”

He had asked so quickly and so guilelessly that she could do was wordlessly nod. She froze nearly immediately, but had lowered her head enough to indicate her assent. Drunk as he was Ai caught it, and his smile was like sunlight breaking through the clouds. The innocent beauty of it made her chest throb, and unconsciously her gaze dropped to his chin. His weak point, she thought suddenly. That place on rare kind’s bodies that make them drunk and vulnerable. He’d answer me honestly if I asked him if he wanted me. If he liked me. All I have to do is ask…

When Mishiru opened her mouth, however, what came out was this. “You’re covered in glass, Ai. We have to clean you up, ok?”

His smile never wavered. “As long as you’re the one doing it, pretty lady.”

Day 27, Hour 4

It had taken Mishiru nearly an hour to carefully remove all the glass embedded in his skin, and then get Ai into the shower. He made things incredibly difficult by smiling goofily down at her, telling her how good a cook she was, and bending to hug her at the most inconvenient times. Stripping him down was only made bearable when he careened to the left, nearly braining himself
on the towel rack. Thankfully, it cut through her lust. She wanted him, yes, but she wanted him conscious.

It was only when he was safely deposited in the shower that she could relax. She watched from the other side of the frosted glass door, his dark figure obscured but still upright. As long as he was still standing, everything would be all right. If he fell, she’d have to go in there after him, and god help her keep her sanity then. Seeing him naked was doable, especially as he’d been weaving on his feet. Naked and wet would be the final blow to her fortitude.

She watched his arms raise to soap his hair and swallowed thickly. Kagerou pulsed underneath her skin, whispering encouragement. *Not yet,* she assured them both. *It will come. But I want him coherent. At least the first time.* And then, with a little flare of self-awareness, *I want him to choose me. Not just be chosen.*

But first: “I’m sorry about bringing up your mother, Ai. I didn’t know who she was - Shibuya just mentioned her in passing. I was...I was just curious.”

“...and jealous?”

Her cheeks pinked. “*No.*”

Kagerou, just as motherless as Mishiru - but apparently not Ai - chose then to subside, and rising above the steady patter of the water from the shower head came Ai’s voice, still drunk, but more focused than it had been in the greenhouse. “Do you know why we fight, Mishiru?”

Mishiru, who was more focused on Kagerou’s easy capitulation and the way he had finally used her name answered distractedly. “Because I want yo-” She interrupted herself by sucking in a harsh breath through her teeth. Oh god, she had not meant to say that. Even when he was this out of it she had not meant to say that.

He chuckled and the sound caused goose pimples to ripple over her flesh. “Good to know, pretty lady, good to know. That’s not why I fight you, of course. Would you like to know why?” A dark shadow fell from his head, reaching across to turn off the water. “My mother would kill me for admitting this, you know. Kind of a fitting segue. But it’s something you should hear before...well. Before you fuck me senseless, I suppose.”

The water cut off and the door shot open, vibrating wildly against the far wall. Mishiru could barely notice. Ai took up her entire attention. Wet, naked, and determined as he stepped over the threshold of the shower, their eyes met and she could see that he was nearly lucid, if not completely so. This caused her blood to rush in her ears, nearly deafening her to his follow up.

“I fight you - I cannot stay away from you - because you are the most infuriatingly perfect woman I have ever known. You are beautiful, an excellent cook, intelligent, interesting...and will kill without hesitation. You will hurt me and enjoy doing it. You are perfect.” Although his expression was steady, he wobbled. Mishiru was too amazed to take notice.

“...And I can’t fucking *stand* it.”

Mishiru’s heart must have somehow vacated her body between the opening of the shower door and Ai’s confession, because all that was left was euphoria, crashing through her like waves, obliterating all sense of right and wrong, expectation and plan. This was something different than admitting lust. This was at the level of spiritual enlightenment. She opened her mouth to say something - what, she did not know, but something would have come out - but before she could the passion in Ai’s expression slipped away, his eyes dimming. Only the fact that she had already been
moving towards him allowed her to catch him before he fell to the floor, unconscious.

Day 30, Hour 8

For the next 24 hours Ai slipped in and out of fever dreams and restless waking, his temperature never quite high enough to warrant panic, but never stable enough to ease Mishiru’s fear. He had been more ill than Shibuya had let on. Mishiru brought this to his attention rather definitively when he finally checked in on them later that day.

For once, Mishiru sensed him coming. Without turning away from Ai, she let Shibuya have it. “Where have you been?! Ai’s sick - he’s been like this for a full day! We need medicine - I can’t keep sweating him to keep the fever down!” Her voice rose frantically, and it was this that caused Shibuya to recoil instinctively before rushing forward to the bed. After checking Ai's temperature with the back of his palm and gently pulling up his eyelids to observe the widened pupils. His fingers trailed down to the scab underneath his chin. Then he leaned back and smiled ruefully at Mishiru.

“He'll be fine. I told you he was overworked. Just give him a few more hours and then he'll be up and about, whining about food. You gave him some aspirin, right?”

Mishiru grit her teeth. “Yes, I obviously gave him aspirin. His fever was over 100 degrees! This isn't fine, Shibuya. He hit his weak point and then passed out-”

“Ahh, so you noticed that, did you...”

“Of course I noticed that! What else could-”

“And you probably noticed the location of his weak spot as well, didn't you.” Shibuya's voice was no longer teasing, nor relieved. Just very serious, and Mishiru belatedly realized that the location of the rare kinds' weak spot was sacrosanct knowledge, and never willingly revealed. Slowly, she nodded, and when Shibuya didn't immediately respond, she reached for Ai's hand to check his pulse, just to give her something to do. It was slow yet steady, and only marginally stronger than it had been an hour before.

Shibuya sighed, and his sharp eyes missed nothing. He ran them down to where she held Ai’s hand, and wondered if he had miscalculated. “I'm sorry, Mishiru. I didn't listen when you both expressed your concerns about living together. I ignored them, thinking that I knew better. Clearly, I was wrong. I think it's time to end the experiment. As soon as Ai recovers you both can go home.”

Mishiru inhaled sharply. Ending the experiment now was a waste of all that had happened over the past month, not to mention Ai's confession. Her panic made her unwise and her protest came spilling out unplanned. "No! I mean, that's such a waste, and- and we were doing better, and..." Rather than look at Shibuya's surprise, she glanced down at Ai's hair, spilling over the pillow. There was a glint among the dark strands, a tiny shard of glass. It sparked an idea in her mind. "We didn't negate- even when he was bleeding and I was picking out the glass. I was bleeding too. On my knees, and on my forearm, my fingertips...our blood had to have mixed. But we didn't negate. Don't you want to figure out why that was?"
Shibuya looked at her long and hard, and Mishiru did her level best not to swallow nervously. Belatedly, she realized she was still holding his hand.

"And is this what he wants, or what you want, Mishiru?"

Her head was full of fragments, jumbled and meshing together, not always coherently. But something stood out clearly amongst the flotsam of her mind. "It's something we will have to talk about and decide together, Shibuya. He might not want anything to do with...the experiment after this. But we are going to have to wait until he gets better to ask him."

Shibuya looked down at his own hands, locking his fingers together as he considered. He was quiet long enough for Mishiru to realize she was being foolish - he had already made up his mind, and she hadn't given him reason enough to change it. Every step of the way they had argued and bickered, and he had seen all that firsthand. Clearly, the decision before her was this: was she strong enough to pursue Ai after Shibuya ended the experiment? The idea chilled her. She needed more time here to decided, more time in an environment that they both knew and was filled with them...and who knew? Maybe when he went back to the outside world, he would change his mind. Would he find her so perfect if they weren’t trapped here?

She didn’t know what she would do if that answer was no. She suspected the fallout would put her time as Eden’s slave to shame, however.

“Perhaps I was a touch hasty, my dear. You are right - you and Ai should discuss the continuation of the experiment first, and then come to me with your decision.”

Mishiru’s head shot up, and Shibuya’s hastily swallowed grin convinced her that the old man had been playing her the entire time. She flushed red, and Kagerou’s mocking laughter caused flames to dance on the backs of her eyelids.

She would never again question Shibuya’s instincts of self-preservation. The man scooted out the door so quickly she hadn’t even time to set her hand aflame. Sighing, she let her anger go, knowing it would serve no purpose. Besides, she had to be calm for when Ai awoke and they discussed the future of the experiment.

She sat back down at the bedside, prepared to wait, worry, and watch.

**Day 31, Hour 5**

The quiet scrape of a knife against plate roused her from her dreams, yet the realization that she was lying on the bed, cocooned within the bedcovers woke her up quickly. Her eyes flew open just as she recognized the scent of peanut noodles, and that there was a very good reason for the right side of her body being far warmer than the left. Ai was tucked in against her, sitting up against the headboard and calmly finishing off the last of his dinner. For a moment, all she could do was gape at him, struggling to understand how their positions had reversed. Hadn’t she been the one sitting by the bed, waiting for him to recover? When had he woken and made food?

More importantly, when and how had she gotten into his bed?

As if he could read her questions in her boggling stare, Ai answered in his usual, expressionless
tone. “I hope you don’t mind me moving you into the bed. You didn’t look all that comfortable hunched over like that, and when I couldn’t wake you I figured you wouldn’t mind. Besides, I had to get up anyway. I was hungry.” To illustrate his point, he sucked in the last peanut noodle, his cheeks hollowing. Mishiru swallowed in response. The shape of his cheekbones shouldn’t make her want to pepper kisses all over his face, nor should it make her want to force him to suck on sensitive areas of her body...

...she was a terrible woman, or maybe just a woman who was seriously sexually repressed.

“There’s plenty left for you downstairs, tho, if you want some. I figured it was the least I could do, after that...display.” His face shuttered, and Mishiru wondered what he regretted more: losing consciousness and surrendering to fever, or his confession. She wondered if this was how the end began, and if her chance to be with him was over just as suddenly as it began. Not willing to let that be the case - at least, not without a fight - she squirreled her hand out from under the blanket and rested it gently on the crook of his elbow.

“It wasn’t - it was no trouble. I mean, you couldn’t help what happened. It was my fault anyway; I should never have mentioned your mother. I’m so sorry, Ai. I didn’t know.”

He watched her with deep, dark eyes, and Mishiru felt words bubbling out of her that she had no control over. “Shi-Shibuya wants to end the experiment. I told him that it would be up to you. I mean, that we would decide. What do you think? Do you want to stay? Or...or to go home?”

For a long while he continued to watch her, blinking slowly. Finally, “What about you? Do you want to go home?”

When she whispered her response, Mishiru felt as if she were tumbling down through the skies with no ground to catch her. “No.”

His eyes widened and he leaned instinctively towards her, yet pulled away just as quickly. Both eyes fell to the plate in his lap, and Mishiru could barely breathe for the ocean roaring in her blood. Had he wanted to kiss her? Was that what he had almost let himself do? Why in flames’ name had he stopped? He knew that she reciprocated. Maybe even more than reciprocated. So what was he waiting for?

Unless he had changed his mind...or she was wrong about his gesture...or he was crazy. That was a legitimate option, Mishiru considered with a spinning head and matching sensibility. She had always been drawn to those who courted madness...

While Mishiru deliberated, Ai settled his empty plate on the nightstand. When he turned back to face her he asked, apropos of nothing, “Why the hell are we so angry? What is wrong with us?”

Mishiru’s mind stalled. It was so far removed from what she had been pondering, she was unable to move beyond the thought that perhaps she had gotten Ai all wrong, and had somehow imagined his entire infatuation with her. Was he trying to warn her off? Or had he sincerely switched gears into a totally new topic? “I, um…”

Ai continued, only once glancing at her from under his long lashes to see if he had discomfited her as much as he’d wanted to. “I suppose we can only answer for ourselves, pretty lady. I’ll even go first.” He took a deep breath, and it was the only indicator that he was painfully serious. “I’m alone.”

Suddenly there was a ray of hope piercing through her fears. “I’m...lonely too.”
He closed his eyes. “I failed them.”

And then for a moment she understood beyond her knowledge, knowing his character without his actions, and his choices without his past. It was like the bright flare of an epiphany: she was not alone in her feelings; his guilt at having failed the rare kinds held him back. He needed her just as much as she needed him, yet he couldn’t allow himself to accept that. If she could only convince him they were not split along the lines of rare kind and power user - that they weren’t, in fact, all that different at all...perhaps then they would finally get what they both needed.

Yet she couldn’t be sure. Kagerou was silent, so this was a rare decision she’d have to make on her own. It was with utmost trepidation that she finally responded, “I failed myself.”

His eyes stayed closed. When he finally responded, his voice was rough and nearly reluctant. “I want you.”

“Both of us?” It was out of her mouth before she could help herself, and his eyes flickered open. He stared down at her helplessly before Mishiru realized it was too soon to expect an answer to that particular question. So she wriggled up into a sitting position, and he remained still all the while. Slowly, she leaned forward, never taking her gaze from him. When he made no move to stop her, run, or beat her senseless, she gave in. Gathering all her courage she brushed her lips against his, taking both her first kiss, and his.

The kiss was gentle for only a moment. Barely had she parted her lips before he surged against her, pressing against her so forcefully she nearly bit his lip in response. His mouth moved hungrily against hers, and his response set her free - all her former uncertainty went up in the flames of their desire. She, who had never before been kissed, set the pace of their kiss by slanting her mouth over his. He groaned low in his throat, and pushed harder against her, until she was dizzy from his scent and his mouth, drowning in the fire of their unschooled passion...

Kagerou surged up inside of her, and she found her strength. She pushed back against him until he tilted perilously on his side, and she swung her leg around him as he fell on his back. Their mouths broke apart as his head fell backwards, dark hair splaying across the pillow, eyes wide and hungry. She leaned back to peruse him, recognizing their current position from her dream the night of their altercation. Slowly, she rocked her hips against his, feeling the hard length of him straining for her. His hands brushed her hips, and she smiled at the way his breath caught in his throat when she ground down against him more forcefully.

**Naked. Want. Mine.** Kagerou’s desires came sharply and without subtlety, and Mishiru found herself unbuttoning his shirt before she realized it was not entirely her will. Yet she didn’t *not* want him naked, so she allowed Kagerou her moment. By the time she reached the last button however, Ai was getting impatient. He rocked up against her, and the look in his eye was less subservient than she would have liked…

She ran her hands slowly down his bare chest, flipping open his shirt as she did. Yet when she reached the buckle of his belt she stopped, and playfully ran her fingers up her own body. She was shocked at her own daring - as outside of her desires she was a modest young woman, and more so *this* was her first time at *everything* - but the heat in his eyes and Kagerou’s urging made it easy to surrender to this primal impulse.

She brought her fingers to the first button, before hesitating. Looking down at him from under her lashes, and rocked her hips in a figure eight motion. Then she tapped the button with the pad of her finger. “Would you like to see?”

“Yes.” His answer was strangled and immediate. It made the blood rush in her veins, and her brave
enough to undo the first button. With a little smile, she gestured to the second.

“And this one, too?”

“Mishiru.” His voice pleaded more than his eyes, and his hands caught haltingly at her hips. She stopped rocking immediately.

“If you want to see, then you have to be a good boy, and lie completely still.”

There was a strangled noise that came from the back of his throat, but he obeyed. Letting his hands rest on her hips, he laid back down and simply watched her, eyes burning.

Mishiru swallowed. Between his eyes and Kagerou’s urging, she was going to lose control of herself very soon. Yet there was something that she wanted, and now that she was here, she knew exactly how to say it.

She unbuttoned another two buttons before beginning. “You know what I am, and what I want. You’re right. We’re right up each other’s alley, Ai.” Another button, and her blouse hung open. She shucked it off, and reached back around for her bra. “I want all those things. To control you...to own you...to hurt you. It’s going to happen, Ai. We’ll make up a safe word - and it won’t be anything we can’t handle - but it will happen.”

She unhooked the clasp form her bra, and it slithered down her body. Ai’s glance dropped reflexively to rosy areolae, crowned by stiffening nipples, but then shot back up to her eyes. He felt, if it was possible, even harder against her. Mishiru knew with a beginner’s confidence that it wasn’t just from her body...but also from her promise.

Now for the hard part. Mishiru swallowed, and leaned down so that their faces were close together, her breasts resting on his chest. “But not this time. This time...the first time, I want it to be about us...not our desires.” Her eyes dropped down to his lips, momentarily too timid to look at his expression. “All the other times it can be what we want, but just this first time I want us to be equals, and-

“I love you.”

Mishiru’s eyes flew to his. “What?”

He swallowed before bringing up his hand to her face, awkwardly stroking a strand of hair behind her ear. “You heard me.”

Mishiru had always envisioned love as a music box, holding tight all the stolen scraps of emotion that Eden could not wrest from her, painted in pretty colors and accompanied by a pleasant, if unchanging tune. Ai’s whispered confession, coupled with the grudging adoration in his gaze, shattered that concept into pieces. It made all that was rational and logical hide away someplace far away, and Kagerou it muted entirely. It caused her to sink her mouth into his, and moan her response against his mouth. Hands reached between them to wrestle off their remaining articles of clothing, all without breaking their desperate kiss. Within the space of several disjointed minutes, they were bare against each other, rubbing against each other in a primal dance that their bodies understood, even if their minds did not.

Mishiru remembered this time in flashes of sensation. His hands gliding across her ribcage, spanning delicately against her breasts. Her hands dipping low, brazenly wrapping against his member. The ragged inhale when she first began to stroke. The fire that burst in her womb when his mouth suckled her nipple. All ran together until she found herself astride him once more, his
manhood 3 inches deep into her, and her last great sanctity of self utterly breached.

It was not the stinging discomfort that stopped her. She was no stranger to pain. But it took her a moment to get over the oddness of someone being inside of her in a natural, biologically possible way, and Ai, seeing the odd expression on her face, misunderstood.

His voice was low and soothing, if a little ragged. “You're going to have to take responsibility, pretty lady.”

Mishiru's head snapped up, causing her to sink down another inch. The discomfort and the oddness of his words caused her anger to ripple just beneath her skin. "What?"

Ai swallowed thickly before continuing, straining to hold himself completely still below her. "For me, what else? 'Cuz I'm yours now, and you're going to have to deal with me for the rest of our lives. I'll love you endlessly, pretty lady, as long as you never- unnh- leave."

Kagerou had used the exact same phrase. How had...? Yet then something more pertinent occurred to Mishiru. It was a concept so glittering and foreign it completely distracted her from the intrusion, and she slid down, taking him to the hilt.

"Oh, god. Oh, Mishiru."

The discomfort was far away now, along with her heartache and loneliness. All that was left before her was a stunning vista of possibility. "Ai, was that...was that a proposal?"

His eyes were dark and unfocused. He swallowed thickly. “It is if you say yes.”

The madness that had taken hold only minutes ago crept back over her. She rocked against him purposefully, causing his head to fall back, and forcing a growl from his lips. The reaction was so engrossing she nearly forgot to answer.

“Ask me in the sunlight,” she gasped, stumbling over the rhythm of her hips against his. The pain was bleeding away, and it was replaced by sheer sensation - the paradoxical strength and smoothness of him inside of her, the muscles of his legs straining against her, the scent of them hanging in the air, the burning need originating in her heart and spreading to her womb. “After we’ve fixed the greenhouse. Then I’ll answer. I promise.”

“Mishiru-”

The last coherent thought she had before losing herself in their lovemaking was if her procrastination had been rendered ineffective by the expression on her face. She hoped he would mistake it for passion. She knew - and so did Kagerou, who purred with pleasure - that it was love.

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Day 122, Hour 8
Several months later, Mishiru stood directly in a shaft of early morning sunlight, streaming in from the colored glass of the greenhouse. It had taken several weeks and Shibuya’s assistance to hit on superheating the shards into a serviceable plate, then overlapping them so that they resembled what they had been. Yet now all was made anew, the plants safe, and more importantly, she and Ai were healed as well.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, subtly glorying in the feel of white silk against her skin. She had never worn a dress like this. Even in her dreams she had never imagined what it would feel like, nor what it would mean. Yet now...since everything had changed all those months ago…

The door leading to the rest of the house swung open, and Ai stepped through. He was not dressed in a western style suit - unlike her, he chose to adorn himself in traditional Japanese robes. He had teased her about wanting a white dress so badly, but now she was grateful for the veil that masked her expression. This way, he wouldn’t see how handsome she found him dressed as such, nor how much she loved him until he lifted it over her eyes, a gesture she found so deeply meaningful.

The door closed behind him, and he strode purposefully towards her. Although he tried for a solemn expression, likely remembering how taboo their approaching union was, the happiness in his eyes gave him away. Yet he paused as he approached, glancing once towards the one noticeable seam in the ceiling, where even she could not superheat it to perfect smoothness.

Mishiru understood. It was there that they had lost control and tumbled into each other’s hearts. It was also there that he had proposed, several months later, and, as she had requested, in the sunlight.

His steps slowed as he reached her, and his eyes raked over her form. Now he could not help the wolfish grin tugging at the corners of his lips, and Mishiru was sure that her answering smile was clearly visible through the lace of her veil. They had debated having Shibuya preside over their ceremony, knowing that they could emotionally blackmail him into doing so. Yet they had eventually decided against it, both not wanting to spark painful memories, and also because they wanted this momentous occasion to belong solely to them.

As such, it would be a shortened ceremony, with only what they deemed most important. There would be no family or friends to see them off and wish them well, but they would have each other, and that was paramount. Everything else was secondary. Their union - their promise to each other - would stand foremost in their heads and hearts, and unlike their predecessors, they would never be torn apart.

It was a promise they had made every time they came together since their first time. It was now going to be made with a gesture more powerful than even their heady forays into sex.

Mishiru banished her thoughts as her intended stood in front of her, now watching her with that quiet expression she had become familiar with over the last few months. Her smile faltered as she too was influenced by the power of this moment. In just a few minutes, they would be bound to each other. Not in a legal sense, of course, as they were both non-persons, unrecognized by every government in the world. Yet they both felt their imminent union to be as binding and immutable as life, death, and hope - the last of which being something they had learned through their time with each other.

Finally, Ai cleared his throat and reached for her hands. She placed hers in his readily. They had decided that he would speak first, as would the man in western tradition. He had been a little surprised, but she had insisted. Dominant as she was in the bedroom, that by no means meant she did not want a little fairy tale romance on her wedding day!

He cleared this throat once more - a clear signal of his nerves - before he began. “I take you to be
my soulfully wedded wife, to love until the end of our days; to walk with you no matter where you go; to respect you through our differences; to honor you above all others, and to light the way for you when we are surrounded by darkness. In return I give you all that I am: my weakness and my strength, my laughter and my sorrow, my joy and my pain. I am yours until our last breath, and I will never leave, deny, or betray you.” At the end of their practiced speech, his voice faltered, and Mishiru’s eyes brimmed with unshed tears. “I love you, Mishiru. I’ll never let you be alone again.”

She was supposed to say every word back to him, just as he had. They had spent hours crafting their vows, wanting them to reflect not only them, but their abnormal lives and their responsibilities. Yet now that he had said them her heart was overflowing, and even Kagerou hummed with complete satisfaction, thrumming against the undersides of her skin. She found herself eschewing ceremony by throwing back her veil and then throwing herself into his arms, kissing him firmly on the lips, again and again.

He let her for a long time, but finally drew back. “You’re supposed to say it back, Mishiru…”

She smiled through her joyous tears. “You are mine. I am yours. I love you so much.” She swallowed thickly. “I respect you, and honor you, and need you...and I will fight heaven and earth so that we are never parted. We’ll never be alone, ever again-”

This time, he drew her to him, and their ceremony dissolved into a series of heartfelt kisses, sanctified by their love. It was by no means a traditional ceremony, and quite a few eyebrows would have raised at their impetuosity, as well as the unorthodox ending. Yet for them it was perfect, and besides, had either of them truly minded, they could simply reenact the ceremony later.

For now they were in love, and they had all the time in the world.

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Chapter End Notes

…or at least until they make their appearance into Code:Beginning…

I apologize for the long wait. This was originally quite different, especially Mishiru. I’d not thought too hard about her character while reading the manga, but while writing this she sort of shook me really hard and pointed me in this somewhat controversial direction. I had a hard time writing her, but I’m glad for the experience.

I hope you enjoy this one shot! There are others on the way, but most (such as Shibuya and Sakurako’s one-shot) won’t be posted until I get a little farther with Code:Beginning. There will be spoilers, and other exciting things to come!
A Glad Day

Chapter Summary

In which the monarchy cracks and the war goes well

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1898.

Takehiro was in serious trouble. Arriving at the palace at midday was bad enough, and he was prepared to take the scolding that was coming to him. What he was not prepared for, however, was to arrive at the palace and find everyone in the military gone.

Takehiro slunk through the hallways of the palace, praying that no one would recognize him. Everyone he passed seemed to be on high alert however, and it didn’t take him long to conclude that something must have happened. Demons attacking again were his first guess, although until he knew exactly where Hideyoshi and the troops went he couldn’t get much further than that. Yet his attempt at finding Red had ended in failure (and as soon as they met up again he was teaching her how to read and write at least enough to leave him messages. Even symbols would do!) and even after he had flirted with the Queen’s ladies in waiting he hadn’t been able to determine anything other than that the army had moved out at dawn. No, they hadn’t heard the destination. But perhaps a few minutes alone might jog their memory?

Takehiro took off before their insinuation could become any more tempting, cursing himself for a fool and a deviously handsome man all the while. Why did he only appeal to those he could never touch? What had he done in a previous life to make the gods hate him?

The best thing he could come up with was to lurk in the throne room, and hope the king might make an official proclamation about wartime plans. Barring that, perhaps he could overhear something that might point to Hideyoshi’s direction. Takehiro grimaced as he slid in behind a corpulent nobleman, hiding his profile behind the man’s bulk. This would have been so much easier had Hideyoshi simply left him directions.

He was fairly sure the man hated him. It was at times like this that he hated him right back.

Perhaps his idea was the right one after all, as the throne room was milling with people, all gossiping worriedly and looking for reassurance. Surely the king would have to make a statement to appease them, Takehiro reasoned. He was currently sitting up on the dais with a face carved out of stone, and the woman sitting next to him didn’t look any better. Takehiro noticed they weren’t holding hands, as they usually did when appearing in public for social functions.

“Good afternoon, Takehiro. I hadn’t expected to see you here, especially since my brother moved out this morning. I suppose you must be tying up a few loose ends before meeting up with the army.”
For the love of all that was normal! How had the poisonous, younger Fujiwara managed to sneak up on him like that? Takehiro entertained dark thoughts about the entire Fujiwara line as he turned, pasting on a polite smile at the last moment. “Hello, Lord Fujiwara. Yes, I am indeed here on an errand for your brother. Although it took longer than it should.” And then, because he might as well ask while he was stuck here, “Have I missed anything? What is the word from the king?”

Souri looked at him directly, and for a moment Takehiro feared he had said the wrong thing. Yet then Souri smiled naturally, and Takehiro was taken aback at how young the man looked. “You haven’t missed much. Word leaked out about the demon uprising in the south only a few hours ago, yet he hasn’t made an official proclamation since. I only know because Brother told me, honestly. But I also know that the king’s Elite Corp moved last night, in response to a sea dragon sighting. Shortly after, Brother and his forces moved southeast to face the influx of demons.”

Takehiro could have kissed the man. He had never expected Souri’s rampant need to be seen as important and in the know would have benefited him like this. Now that he at least had a direction, he had a much better chance of finding the army. He had only to hope that Hideyoshi wouldn’t kill him when he arrived.

Yet it wouldn’t do to take off immediately. Then Souri may suspect how little Takehiro knew. “I see. Well, as soon as the king finishes his speech I’ll be off after them. I hope he doesn’t take too long.”

Souri’s eyes lidded, and it turned his smile from something natural to secretive. “I’m sure the king won’t take long. The queen, on the other hand, may have a bit more to say…”

His tone was laden with meaning, and none of it pleasant. Takehiro exhaled slowly, wracking his brain for what Souri could possibly mean. “Is she addressing humanitarian issues, then? Or perhaps something to bolster the resolves of the people?” Everyone knew the queen was not warlike, and had been kept away from the planning table as well as the battlefield. What else could she possibly have to say at such a time?

“I couldn’t say for sure, I think the queen’s concerns are a bit more personal…and fall a little closer to home, as it were. She mentioned something yesterday at tea, and I fear she may bring it up today. I counseled her to wait, but I am not entirely sure she will take my advice. We can only wait, and hope that she does.”

Takehiro’s mouth went dry. Hideyoshi had worried about his brother’s meteoric rise throughout the ranks of noblemen, but had never suspected his brother had the ear and the confidence of the queen. This also went against what Red had told him about her sister’s vague dislike of the man. Just how and when had they gotten close? Or, if it were a lie, how could Souri know that the queen had something to address?

No, it had to be a lie. If the queen said nothing it couldn’t be proven, as he had ‘advised’ her to remain silent. Yet if the queen said something, anything at all… Takehiro swallowed, trying to ease the lump in his throat. He suddenly felt as if he were adrift in a war much more complicated than the one against their supernatural foes.

The king stood, cutting off any need or space for Takehiro to respond. Everyone settled down nearly immediately, intent on hearing their sovereign’s message. “Good people of Takama ga hara! I’m sure you have all heard rumors of the demon uprising. I can assure you that they are true - the demons have attacked to the south, and in great number. But be not alarmed! For although the demons have struck again, we have pushed them to the edges of our land. We have defeated them in battle time and time again, and finally stand at the verge of wiping them out altogether!” He waited through the resulting applause, and Takehiro wondered just how many people in the room
knew the truth - that they had no idea what happened to demons when they were slain, and whether or not they truly made a dent in the unending forces.

“This is a desperate battle for them, and an exciting time for us - soon we shall be free of them, and their pet dragons that raze our homes and our fields. Takama ga hara will once again be a free land, the home of our memories when peace and safety reigned. To bring this about! Ask only for your support, good people, and your faith in our fighting forces. Believe in them, and do not fear. For as long as we stand true, the kingdom will not falter. For the strength and glory of Takama ga hara!”

The crowd cheered in response; the king’s speech a rousing success. The earlier fear was banished, and Takehiro found himself nodding to himself. The king’s true strength - although endowed with control over the flames of hell - was not in his battle prowess, but in using his energy and inner fire to direct his people. While there were dark rumors of the full extent of his power - especially with his knowledge of the kings and legions of hell- moments like these made such rumors impossible to entertain. The king’s moral uprightness was part of his charisma, and with such a powerful presence there were few who could doubt him.

People began to disperse, breaking their impromptu formations in order to chatter amongst themselves. Many filed out the doors, content enough to continue on with their daily lives. Yet there was still a good number of people in the room when Souri turned to Takehiro, and with a half smile said, “It was a good speech. Hopefully it will be enough to quell the immediate panic. Even better, it seems as if her highness took my advice- ahh.”

It was too perfectly played to be real. Every one of the man’s actions was crafted to perfection - from the relieved smile, to the arch of his eyebrow, to just the right cadence of his surprise in his voice. Takehiro knew this, if he knew nothing else: Souri had staged something today, controlled it from beginning to end. Furthermore, he would bet anything that it wasn’t going to be good.

Takehiro followed the line of his gaze. There, a young boy wriggled out of the hold of governess, scampering forward to get an unimpeded view of the dais.

“Soutarou! Come back at once!” The flushed governess snapped her fingers as if the boy were a small dog. Takehiro sniffed. There was no self-respecting boy who would answer a summons like that, especially in a room full of people. As Takehiro suspected, Soutarou glanced back, pouted, and pushed his way forward.

The governess quivered with rage, and although too well bred to push her way through the people Soutarou was small enough to weave through, looked as if she wouldn’t mind causing bodily harm upon the boy. For now, she settled with calling out in a much louder voice. “Soutarou!”

Her voice carried, and people began to look around for the boy. Yet Soutarou was surprisingly fast - even Takehiro lost track of him a few times - and her efforts resulted in nothing more than personal embarrassment. Finally, Takehiro noticed the boy half-hidden by a pillar behind the dais, barely five feet to the left of the queen. Hikari, noticing the red-faced governess calling for her charge, glanced down and just happened to notice the boy beneath her. She smiled and said something to him, and although Takehiro couldn’t make out what it is, it was enough to bring the boy out of hiding and to approach the dais.

“Oh dear.” Two such simple words, and yet when Souri Fujiwara uttered them, Takehiro knew trouble was coming. Yet it didn’t make sense - the queen was beloved among her people, due to her kindness in dealing with all. The young scamp was adorable, designed to touch the hearts of adults. What could possibly go wrong?

Soutarou had reached the queen, and wobbled a little as he bowed. The queen was obviously
charmed, and even went so far as to shake the boy’s hand. They spoke together for a few moments, and it seemed as if Souri’s warnings were for nothing. Yet then the boy turned and pointed, gesturing to someone or something at the far end of the throne room. Takehiro glanced over and instinctively angled himself behind a column. What was Kyo doing here? And why did he look as worried as Takehiro felt?

The queen’s goblet slipped from her fingers, and the sound of it hitting the floor echoed throughout the hall. All extraneous conversation halted as Kyo strode toward the dais, heading straight for the worried boy and the shell-shocked queen. The king, who had stooped to pick up the queen’s goblet, took one look at his wife and closed his eyes.

“Oh no.”

Takehiro ignored Souri’s murmur. The queen’s lips moved soundlessly, although the closer Kyo came the more agitated she became. Finally, as Kyo reached the foot of the dais, she found her voice.

“He’s...he’s yours?”

“Soutarou, come.”

They spoke in tandem, and between them the boy flinched. He avoided Hikari’s outstretched hands by moving so quickly to his father that he seemed to flash from one place to another. Kyo did not answer the queen’s question until the boy was tucked securely against his side. “He’s mine. Good day, your highness; Father.” He bowed, yet before he could turn to leave Hikari tore her goblet from her husband’s grip and threw it back down to the floor. There was a collective inhale from the crowd, and several onlookers appeared rather faint. They had never seen the queen lose control, and it was a more immediate worry than the war.

“You have...he is your son?” Her voice was laced with rage, yet the pain was obvious on her face. Her arms trembled at her sides, and Takehiro suddenly remembered Karin’s warnings, issued a few days ago: I’m worried for her. I’m starting to think she’s a little unstable.

Kyo glanced down at his son, placing a protective hand on the boy’s head. Such a paternal gesture was at odds with the man he had faced just a few days ago. “You have difficulty accepting such a simple notion? He is mine, yes. Now good day-”

“Look at me!” Hikari’s scream carried throughout the throne room, and Takehiro flinched. Her eyes glittered fiercely, from a mixture of rage and unshed tears. “Look at me, you barbarian! Look me in the eye and tell me he is your son!”

“Papa...” Soutarou whimpered, and looked close to tears himself. Kyo looked down at him, and from his angle Takehiro could see the pained expression on his face. Takehiro couldn’t understand it. This was humiliating, in a court that disavowed unsightly displays and promoted inner harmony. How could the king possibly let this charade continue? He simply stood there with a painful expression, watching his wife at scream at his son, attended by half the most powerful noblemen in the kingdom.

Yet Kyo seemed to gain resolve from his son’s tearful face, so he straightened his shoulders, and looked into the eyes of the Queen of Heaven. They held each other’s gaze for a long moment, and their animosity seemed to crackle in the air between them. Everyone in attendance held their breath, waiting for the outcome of this silent, mental battle. Later on, Takehiro would identify this as the defining moment that signified the fall of the kingdom, but for now it was merely the moment that broke the queen.
Having finally found the truth she sought, Hikari staggered backwards, nearly tripping over her throne. “No - no, it cannot be!” She swung her head to the side, seeking out her husband. “Matsuhiro…please tell me it’s not true!”

She sought reassurance, but received none. The king remained silent, with sorrow etched into his features. Curiously, he did not look at her, but the young boy.

The queen shook, spasms of grief and madness shaking her frame. “But you told me…no. No. You lied to me, you kept this from me! How could you? And I trusted you! I agreed to…” The tears streaming down her face choked her, and it was this that prompted her husband to reach out to comfort her. Yet she stepped away blindly, falling back onto her throne. Finally her grief overcame her anger, and she held her head in her hands, and sobbed.

Soutarou was crying as well, quiet tears that streamed down his face. Realizing this, Kyo took the boy into his arms and walked slowly from the throne room. People parted as he walked past, and although the boy hid his face into his father’s neck, the king’s heir never looked back. The king watched them go, reeling from the interaction, and how his wife had pushed him away.

Takehiro was so caught up in the drama of the moment he had forgotten about Souri until he spoke. “My brother must be told of this. Please, disregard your errand and travel quickly to the village of Nishal - you’ll likely intersect with him there.” He shook his head and sighed. “Poor woman. To learn the truth of the boy’s parentage in such a way…”

Takehiro bit his tongue to keep from accusing the man of his part in all this. Now that he knew Fujiwara’s destination, there was no more time to waste. Still, he couldn’t help but feel as if he had played right into Souri’s hands. One thing was for sure - he wasn’t going to tell Red what had happened, if he could help it. He’d leave that to Kouji or Hideyoshi, as she was bound to take the news better from family, or the man she was not-so-secretly in love with. He nodded to the politician, taking his leave.

If he had known this would be the outcome of his lateness, he might not have visited the enclave at all.

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1 week later

Kouji shifted in the underbrush, swatting at a persistent mosquito. The night air was cool, and it provided a calming contrast to the excitement that pounded through him, heating his veins. Tonight was the beginning of the end, the field marshal had promised them, and it would a battle that would be remembered for 1000 years. With this, the demon force would be effectively halved, and Takama ga hara’s safety within reach. Kouji grinned in the darkness. All that was well and good, but it was not what fired his mind. This battle would be the chance to redeem himself, and god help any monster that got in his way.
One hundred yards to his left was Karin, who was amusing herself by using the wind to pull at Takehiro’s clothes, annoying him in the only way she could. From the muffled curses and poorly aimed pinecones thrown in her direction, it was clear she had succeeded. Kouji envied them for their levity. Karin was young and trusted in their combined abilities implicitly, and Takehiro, when it came to battle, always kept a cool head. Yet Kouji would never trade away his battle euphoria, even if it left him jittery and distracted in the hours leading up until battle. It was simply too delicious to deny.

Kouji shifted again and wondered what would come first: the order to attack, or the sunrise. It was the hour before dawn, and after a week of pushing the demons to the coast, they had finally trapped them in the ruins of an old fishing village. Here, the diminished horde lay in wait, surrounding and protecting Belphegor, one of the great demon kings of hell. According to the king, who had knowledge of the seven kings and their powers, it was a supernatural representation of sloth, and although its power was strong, was slow to rouse itself to its full power. It had been this that had shaped the field marshal’s battle plans, even though his reluctance in implementing it was obvious: the Shadow unit was to attack Belphegor while the army and the other elite power users faced the swarm. The three of them had proven themselves the hardiest fighters, as well as eminently well suited to fighting together, pinecones aside. They were the best chance of defeating the demon quickly. This worked perfectly with Kouji’s plans to earn his hero status as this time, he would be the one to land the final blow.

He swore it on his power - Belphegor’s terror would end this day.

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“Banzaiiiiiii Shihoin Kouji, and the king’s army! Long live Takama ga hara!”

Kouji smiled widely as he was toasted, drunk on wine and victory. He raised his glass in acknowledgement, and the throng of men surrounding him did the same. Splashed with the alcohol that sloshed over the upraised cups, Kouji leaned back his head and laughed exultantly. They had done it! And more so, just as he had sworn, he had been the one to ultimately defeat Belphegor!

The summons had come at dawn, and by mid morning they were in the midst of pitched battle. While the ground forces were even in number with the demons, Field Marshal Fujiwara had trained his men well, and the horde had fallen back before their ferocity and courage. The turning point came when one legion had managed to spear right through to the enemy’s heart. It was then that the shadow unit had slipped through a hole in their ranks, and engaged Belphegor in battle.

Kouji had thought fighting Kyo was difficult enough, but Kyo was a man of flesh and bone, and it was easier to read his movements through the wind. Karin experienced similar difficulties, augmented by the inability to sense through blood, and so at the beginning of battle it was Takehiro who had pushed Belphegor back, slashing at the body while dodging the hell flame. Yet it had eventually unfolded just as Fujiwara had planned - Takehiro and Karin fought in tandem, distracting Belphegor from either side while Kouji was able to able to land the final blow. He had known it was the end even as attacked, simultaneously slicing through Belphegor as well as calling down a concentrated burst of wind from the heavens - an attack he had decided to call crash down.
As soon as Belphegor had fallen, the remaining demons had dispersed, presumably to join the other hosts still plaguing the island. Yet they had won a great victory, and felling one of the demon kings of hell was an unprecedented victory with more honor attached than slaying a dragon. Kouji had howled as the demon fell, bloody and battered and barely able to stand upright. Yet it had been worth it, honor, pain, or no. Just as he had felt while facing the dragon, he would have died 1000 times simply to face that foe again.

Shaking off the congratulations of the other elite power users, Kouji shakily made his way through the crowds. His injuries had not been as severe as they had been when facing the dragon, yet coupled with the alcohol it was still difficult to navigate his way through the throng of celebrants. Thankfully, Karin and Takehiro were likewise uninjured; Kouji having sustained the most serious injuries when Belphegor had breathed flame as he fell to the earth. Karin had been able to deflect most of it, but not all. Kouji would have difficulty bending and stretching for a few days, but the healers had seen to him quickly, and the damage was minimized.

Still, he was feeling woozy enough to warrant a half an hour’s rest. His heart rebelled, wanting to take celebrate with his comrades in the army, yet his body was weak. It was in his best interests, he knew, but still…

“Takehiro!” Kouji knew that voice, and that tone of equal parts amusement and annoyance. Takehiro was teasing Karin again, and while that was not surprising, the fact that he still had energy to do so was. Kouji glanced over at them, and all thoughts of rest vanished. His friends were settled around a small, lit fire pit at the fringes of the camp; ignored and unwelcome by the army even at the most joyous of times. That didn’t seem to bother them, however. Each held a bottle of wine, and empty bottles lay at their feet - and even though Kouji knew both could hold their alcohol well (Karin, by nature of her mother’s heritage, and Takehiro through steady practice) they were bound to be very drunk. Yet they were not carousing wildly, and as such, Kouji deemed them an acceptable alternative to rest. Sitting with them wouldn’t hurt his body, and as his closest comrades he wanted to celebrate with them more than anyone else.

He made a wide loop around other members of the army, so that he wouldn’t draw attention to his destination. Yet before he could make his presence known to his comrades, Takehiro’s slurred query made him pause, and duck behind the nearest tent.

“So...did you tell Kouji?”

Karin looked at him with an exaggeratedly befuddled expression. When she responded, her first attempt was in her native tongue, and she had to try again. “Tell Kouji what?”

What indeed, Kouji wondered. They had already congratulated him and each other hours ago, and as far as he knew Karin should have nothing in particular to tell him. Yet from the telling look on Takehiro’s face, he knew something that Kouji did not.

“You know, about….” He trailed off, flapping his hands strategically.

Karin found it all most amusing. “Are you pretending to be a bird?” She dissolved into giggles that died immediately when Takehiro leaned in to whisper something into her ear. “Ohhhhh. That! No. I have not told him.” Her eyes widened. “Why, have you?!”

Takehiro nearly fell off the tree stump he was perched upon. “Do you think I want to die? We’d have to tell Hideyoshi then, too. Then I’d die again.”

Karin attempted to nod sagely, but broke out into giggles. She always had been a happy drunk, as opposed to Kouji’s somber leanings. “And then we’d have to hide in the wall again. Besides,
Kouji’d probably be jealous.”

Takehiro tsked. “So bloodthirsty.”

“I know!”

Kouji felt the wind around his body ripple, but he also recognized the man disrupting his airwaves. He turned to warn Hideyoshi to be silent, but the field marshal needed no prompting. His sharp eyes took in the drunken two-thirds of the Shadow Unit and his mouth thinned. He nodded to the hero of the hour - deservedly this time - before clapping a hand on his shoulder and nodding to Karin and Takehiro. “Do you know what they’re talking about? Up until now they were simply telling stories and trying not to discuss rare kinds, but that little exchange seemed a bit more important. What exactly did they do that makes Takehiro fear for his life?”

Kouji smirked. He, too had been stumped until Karin had mentioned hiding in the walls. When he had met up with the army she had laid into him about not warning her about Kyo, and had finally admitted to hiding in the walls - Takehiro’s hiding places - in order to escape his notice. While Kouji had found the whole thing incredibly amusing, it had also annoyed him. Kyo had not given him his word, and had chased after his cousin anyway? That didn’t speak well of him, although Kouji understood the impulse. Stagnation was terrifying, and sometimes made people act in unprincipled ways.

He did not question what the field marshal was doing, listening in on their conversation. He was simply too sloshed for it to cross his mind. “Karin caught Kyo’s attention while at the palace. From their guilt, the interaction must have been more exciting than she originally told me. All she admitted to was hiding in the walls.”

“With Takehiro?”

Kouji shrugged. “I suppose so. How else would she know about the passageways?”

Hideyoshi nodded slowly, mouth still pressed into that flat line. He then changed the subject without segue way. “Do you ever envy them? For being young, powerful, free?”

This was twice now that the field marshal had confided in him, and Kouji felt a flush of warmth at being so honored. It was different than being honored by the king. With Hideyoshi, they could be two men who respected each other, without watching their words out of deference. Still, he couldn’t quite follow Hideyoshi’s reasoning. “I would hardly call Takehiro free. Karin is bound as well. You know that better than anyone.”

“If not free, per se, they are free to act, to choose, to do. They could go anywhere, and be anything they wish to be - perhaps it is only myself, but that notion...it is intoxicating.”

The field marshal’s true meaning hit Kouji like a bolt of lightning. “You mean that they are free to pursue whomever they wish: young, powerful, and unmarried, more like.” Hideyoshi did not favor him with a response, and kept his gaze steadily on Takehiro and Karin, who had progressed to testing their drunken reflexes with shows of agility and flexibility. Kouji pressed on, undeterred by his friend’s silence. “And if you could have their freedom, would you take it? Even if it meant leaving behind your family? Your children?”

“Of course not.” The words were uttered without hesitation, yet with no small amount of sadness. “But it is a pleasant fantasy, nonetheless.”

Kouji was tempted to ask how the poem was coming, the one he was writing for his unnamed love.
Yet even he knew it was too delicate a topic to broach when he was in his cups.

Snippets of Karin and Takehiro’s conversation drifted from the fire pit, and had the moment been less somber, Kouji might have laughed aloud. “I’d make a great woman! I’m gorgeous!”

“No you would not. You’re not feminine at all!”

“Yes I would! Look at my eyelashes! Look at them flutter, dammit!”

“Yeah, but can you wear a dress?”

“I have before!”

“...damnit, Takehiro. I totally wanna’ see that.”

When even that exchange couldn’t lift the field marshal’s spirits, Kouji asked, “If it makes you so sad, why do you continue watching them?”

Hideyoshi’s eyes shuttered before he responded. “Because I need to be prepared.”

“Prepared for what?”

The field marshal smiled for the first time throughout their conversation. Even then, it was forced. “The inevitable. He’ll come to me some day and ask for help, and I’ll have to find a way to give it to him. That being said, perhaps he’ll come to you first, as you’re her cousin.”

In his defense, Kouji probably wouldn’t have understood what the field marshal was implying even had he not been half drunk. “I don’t understand. Is Karin...picking on him? I always thought it was the other way around…”

The field marshal’s odd smile was replaced with exasperation, and it made Kouji feel more at ease. There had been something more pained in his smile than in his thin-lipped glare. “Surely you cannot be blind to their mutual affection. It is only a matter of time, and of opportunity. I’ve been expecting it for some time now. Haven’t you?”

Finally catching the field marshal’s meaning, Kouji eyes widened and his head swung over to his comrades, who were currently engaged in what was either a tribal dance or an unknown form of drunken kick-boxing. Without altering his expression, he swung his gaze back to his companion. “It’s the war, isn’t it - it's driven you a little mad.”

Whether it was his expression or his sentiment, Kouji’s words finally broke through his low mood. Hideyoshi tore his eyes from the rollicking twosome, and chuckled. “Perhaps you are right. I think all the stress is making me a little on edge, at the least. It makes me a poor companion, certainly.” He gestured to Karin and Takehiro, who were veering quite close to the fire. “Go on and join them, before one of them sets themselves on fire. I’ll see you at the morning briefing, hero.”

Kouji saluted him sharply, his compliment chasing away all his dark thoughts. Perhaps the field marshal was still sorrowing, but there was nothing Kouji could do to help him. And tonight it was all too easy to forget any doubts or worries and to give in to uncomplicated happiness. It was in this mindset that Kouji joined his comrades, spending the rest of the evening in perfect trust and camaraderie.

It was indeed a glad day.
Chapter End Notes

I am under the google enabled impression that there are evergreen trees in Japan. If not, just pretend there are trees that drop pinecones in Takama ga hara.
The letter was merely paper, tri-folded, prettily written, and innocuous. Therefore, the urge to blast it into a million pieces was silly. Yes, she should simply refold it, and forget all about it. Paper couldn’t hurt you, and if forgotten surely what was written within would never come to pass.

Sakurako’s determination lasted precisely 15 seconds before her temper got the better of her and her mother’s letter went up in what resembled white flame, until not even ashes remained. It had been a long time since she had used her ability on something so petty, as her new training regimen with Zed drove her to the brink of exhaustion each and every day. Yet she felt it was warranted - a week ago she had turned 15, and her mother’s primary response was to tell her that her hand in marriage had been requested by a nobleman twice her age, and while her father wouldn’t agree to any arrangement before she was 17, she should begin getting used to the idea now. Oh, and happy birthday, darling. Was Zed doing well, and as handsome as ever?

Just thinking about her mother’s flippancy made her want to destroy more things, but it was just past midnight and if she didn’t move now, she would be late for her rendezvous with her mother’s favorite. Even his patience would be tested if she didn’t meet him on time, after she had made such a fuss about the contents of her mother’s letter! So, sneaking past the snoring lady-in-waiting she shared a room with, she quietly made her way to the greenhouse. She had borrowed an extra key from the queen a few weeks back, and worried about the repercussion should she be caught with it, Zed had decided he would hold onto it, just in case. Still, it was a convenient place to meet when they were unable to find a moment of privacy elsewhere.

The door was unlocked when she arrived, signifying Zed was already within. Sakurako cautiously stepped inside, using her ability to sense for him. It was difficult, in such a place. The thousands of plants packed into the room were all well-tended, and bursting with life. If Zed’s power hadn’t been anathema to hers, it would have been like looking for a needle in a haystack. While the endeavor was good practice, it was also somewhat frustrating.

“Over here.”

He was sitting underneath the weeping cherry tree, visibly tense and utterly focused. The greenhouse was one of Zed’s least favorite places in the palace for the very reason it so frustrated her - if he lost control over his ability even for a moment, the plants would begin to sicken and die, and not only would he have destroyed something beautiful, they would be caught. Sakurako hurriedly made her way over to him, and he didn’t relax until they were within a few feet of each other. This close together, their powers cancelled each other’s out. Tonight, however, Sakurako
imperiously held out her hand, as she knew her hold on her own power fluctuated whenever she was impassioned...and that she was very likely going to lose her temper.

Zed glanced at her hand and sighed, knowing exactly what it signified. He tried to soften her ire with a little smile as he took her hand in his. “It’s that bad? Is someone ill?” She could feel the pulse of his own power against her skin, and his worry made her soften her response. She didn’t want Zed to worry, after all. Now that Kyo had gone, taking Soutarou with him after the queen’s outburst over a week ago, there was no one but her to temper his power surges. He had to be very careful to keep his emotions in check, otherwise they would have to figure out a way to sleep in the same room at night, as they had when they were younger and had very little control over their abilities.

“No, no. Everyone at home is fine, don’t worry. With them all is normal - Father misses playing shogi with you, and Mother misses you more than she misses me, I think. No, our family is doing just fine.”

“When is the problem? You were so upset earlier I thought you would do something drastic.”

Sakurako had to take several deep breaths before she could continue. “An offer in marriage has been made for me.”

Zed froze, his face shuttering in on itself. He watched her for a long moment, so silent and still that Sakurako began to get nervous. She had never seen such an empty expression on his face, and something about it made her scramble to fill the silence. “Father refused it, of course. He told them he wouldn’t consider any offers until I was 17. Mother just...she just wanted to warn me, is all. Just to prepare me for the inevitable.”

His odd expression didn’t alter in the slightest, yet he overcame whatever he was feeling enough to speak. “You think it’s inevitable?”

The coldness in his voice made her tremble, but all she had to do was remember her mother’s counsel on accepting the man with the best legs and her rage straightened her spine. “Of course not! What are you, stupid? I’m just telling you what they said. What I’m saying is that I’m going to have to make some plans. I figure I can stay here safely for another year-and-a-half, but after that, I’m gone.” She squeezed his hand, trying to thaw out his uncomfortable expression. “I’m never marrying anyone, if I can help it. Especially not someone that someone else picks for me. Argh, the whole idea is stupid, anyway. It’s not like they’re powerful enough to force me, and that’s what they’d have to do to make that work. C’mon, Zed. You know me better than anyone - do you really think I’d take something like this lying down?”

He gripped her palm firmly before letting out a long, slow exhale from between his teeth. “So what will you do? Fight them? Or run away?”

Sakurako shrugged, feigning carelessness. There was no room for anger when Zed looked this subdued. Besides, on the rare occasions when Zed was this low, it was her place to raise his spirits. “I’ve got a few escape plans in mind, and it’s useful that we planned out a couple when we came here. I figure between now and then there will be plenty of opportunity for escaping overseas.”

There was a hint of a smile as he responded, and the aura of death she had instinctively negated with her own power lessened. “Those plans required my assistance, if I remember correctly...”

Here was the tricky part, and it was the only part of this conversation she hadn’t figured out yet. Before their breakdown, it would have been a matter of course for her to command him to follow her. Yet since their argument a few weeks ago the balance between them had shifted, and she no
longer felt she had the right to do so. Sakurako had finally begun to grow up, and although it was in a different way than Zed, the effects were no less felt. “I...I wouldn’t say no. But it’s up to you, Zed. I wouldn’t leave until we stabilize enough to handle the separation, if you chose to stay. And there would always be Kyo, and Soutarou, and those restrictive things the queen goes on about…”

“Are you telling me you want me to stay?”

“No, I-!” Sakurako’s head shot up, but Zed was smiling broadly now, clearly teasing her. “Zed, you’re an idiot.”

Zed’s grin grew as he sat back down underneath the weeping cherry, pulling her down with him. “No, you’re the idiot, Rako. Like I could leave you alone. Who else could handle you?”

Embarrassed, Sakurako muttered rebelliously under her breath. “Yeah, well, who’s going to handle your-”

The door suddenly opened, interrupting them and scaring them half out of their wits. They fell silent and immediately lowered their power until only someone who was specifically searching out for them might be able to find them. Thankfully, the cherry tree’s branches were thick with flowers, and the tree itself was located in the darkest corner of the room, further hiding them.

Sakurako could just make out one indistinct shape, yet from the height and girth she would guess it was a man, dressed in a western style suit. The shape moved slowly and quietly, bending over at intervals to look more closely at the flowers. Finally, he walked through a beam of moonlight filtering in through the thick glass walls, and Sakurako recognized him as a man Kyo had once pointed out to her as proof that not all normal humans were powerless.

What was Lord Fujiwara Souri doing in the queen’s greenhouse so late at night?

Her answer came when Zed’s finger dug into her side, drawing her attention to the front, wooden wall of the greenhouse. A portion of the wall slid to the side, allowing a woman dressed in an ornate kimono to enter in. Sakurako’s heart dropped into the pit of her stomach even before the woman turned around. She knew that kimono. She had spent hours glaring at that exact kimono, just because she could not show her displeasure to the wearer.

Fujiwara turned and smiled. “I must admit, the beauty of the flowers only seems to improve at night. It is a shame that the greenhouse could not be open for all to enjoy at such a time.” He bowed graciously as the queen drew nearer, yet the queen made no response. She drew close to the ambassador, and then pulled up to her full height, as if that would intimidate a man who stood nearly a head taller.

“I have no patience for your flattery, Fujiwara. Let us get down to business. I have considered your proposal, and even though I find you personally distasteful, I can do nothing but agree to help you in your...scheme. In return for my cooperation I have three conditions, and I trust they can be easily met.”

The queen articulated each word so precisely that every syllable felt like an insult. Clearly, she must have been pushed to the brink to accept the man’s offer. Fujiwara ignored her unpleasantness, choosing to smile graciously instead. “I understand, your highness. And they are?”

“One, that whatever your plan entails, it does not harm Soutarou. The boy is blameless, and I would not see him harmed for of the sins of his father.”

Fujiwara straightened, and there was something in the alignment of his spine that suggested that
the lady had gone too far. “But of course, your highness. The boy will not be targeted. I would never dream of doing such a thing.”

The queen let out a quiet, humorless laugh. “Dream? Hah. I know what kind of man you are, Fujiwara. I know well the gleam of ambition in your eye, and that it hides a well that cannot be quenched. Still, I have your promise and I will hold you to it. Secondly, I would like you to extend the same courtesy to my sister. Do not involve her. I would see her untouched by this travesty.”

Fujiwara inclined his head, smiling at some inner source of amusement. “This is also in line with my current plans, my lady. You need not worry for your sister. I have little interest in foreigners with no political clout, I assure you.”

The queen looked directly at him, and Sakurako could feel the flash of energy against her skin. She had grown quite used to Queen Hikari’s penetrating gaze, and wondered how well Lord Fujiwara would stand against it. “A half-truth. How cunning. Which part of your pretty sentiment is honest, then?”

“My lady is as discerning as she is beautiful. One would expect no less from the Queen of Heaven. My brother has requested for me to leave your sister be, and I will obey out of love for him. He would do no less for the weakest of his premier soldiers, his so-called ‘Shadow Elite.’ That being the case, I can guess the parameters of your third condition: that Shihoin Kouji be left alone as well?”

The silence in which the queen cast her eyes to the ground was deafening. Sakurako inadvertently leaned forward, and Zed had to pull her back lest she send a flowerpot to the floor, giving away their position.

When the queen finally spoke it was in a voice that signified a woman stretched beyond the bounds of her endurance. “My third condition is this: that Matsuhiro learns the devastation of losing the vehicle on which all his hopes are placed. I want Kyo gone, ambassador. Gone, and unable to take the throne. Do you understand me?”

Sakurako had to bite the web between her forefinger and thumb to keep from crying out in anger. Kyo was blameless! This madwoman was the only one who had done anything wrong! How dare she order him killed? Zed, being no stranger to her mood and her sense of righteousness, placed his free hand against her scalp. The unearthly coolness of his touch paradoxically calmed her, and allowed her to listen in to Fujiwara’s response.

“I see. So either the hero has fallen from grace...or you think him too powerful for even me to touch. I suppose there is a third option. Perhaps your hatred for the king’s son overpowers even the familial love you bear your dearest cousin.”

The queen inhaled sharply. “Speak not of him, you snake. You know nothing. Kyo needs to be removed for the good of the kingdom, and I would protect those that need protecting. That is all.”

Fujiwara sketched a small bow that was two parts deference and one part mockery. “It is as you say, my lady. I should not venture to speak of matters that I do not understand. Rest assured, all three conditions shall be met as my plan unfolds. I will contact you when I have need of your part of the bargain.”

The queen needed no more dismissal than this. She turned from him immediately, activating the hidden door and leaving without a look back. Fujiwara shook his head as soon as the door closed behind her, speaking to himself in a voice that while quiet, carried to the hiding teenagers. “What games women play, even ones so high as her. And to move so decisively against her husband! I
must say, I hadn’t expected this. Well, she will get what she deserves, in the end. I suppose we all will.” He leaned down to take in the delicate scent of the blooming Night Lily, humming in appreciation. “Yes, quite beautiful. As are all things that must die…” Leaving that disquieting statement hanging in the air, he turned and strode from the room.

Neither Sakurako or Zed made a sound until long minutes had passed since the the door had closed behind him. Then, Sakurako let go of Zed’s hand so that she could sense for his life energy behind the door. When she was sure that he had gone, she immediately grabbed his hand again and began tugging him towards the exit.

Zed didn’t say a word until they were safe in his room, alone now that Kyo was gone. He slumped down against the wall, leaving his bed - the only comfortable spot in the room - for Sakurako. “We have to warn Kyo. We can’t let her get away with this.”

Sakurako ignored the spot on the bed and paced back and forth. Power pulsed against her skin, and it took incredible effort not to unleash it. “Kyo won’t care. As long as she doesn’t go after Soutarou he’ll just laugh at her efforts. No, we need to tell the king. He’ll care-”

“And how do we do that? You remember what Kyo told us, that our situation here will only last as long as he isn’t reminded of my - and by extension, your - presence. Now with Kyo gone, who’s to say he won’t just kill me anyway? Besides, why would he believe us? We’d be accusing his wife and his trusted ambassador - why would he take our word over theirs?”

Sakurako stopped pacing and fixed her friend with an earnest look. “Well, we have to do something! We can’t just let the queen try to kill Kyo!”

Zed’s expression was as pained as hers. “I know, Rako. Just...let’s talk it out and see if that helps. So the ambassador-”

“Lord Fujiwara.”

“Ok, Lord Fujiwara has a plan, and the queen is helping. We don’t know what the plan is, but we do know that Soutarou and the queen’s sister supposedly won’t be involved. We also know that Kyo is to be targeted so he can’t take the throne...and that the queen wants the king to be miserable. Yet we don’t know the end goal of the plan for sure. Neither mentioned actually killing Kyo. And are they going to go after the king as well? Taking Kyo out could just be a small part of it. Anything else you can think of?”

Sakurako glanced to the side, marshalling her thoughts. Zed was right yet something about the whole affair seemed off to her. After a moment of thought, it came to her: at no point did Fujiwara give the impression that he cared one way or another for any of the queen’s demands, including the one about Kyo. Fujiwara had seemed rather unconcerned about the whole thing, considering he was plotting treason with the queen...almost as if he wasn’t worried about the eventual outcome at all. Yet only a fool would be so little worried about such a dangerous plot, and from all that she had heard, Fujiwara was no fool.

Another possibility shot through her like a bolt of lightning, and she actually lit up a little in excitement. “Zed.”

Zed eyed her warily, knowing both that look and the destruction she could inadvertently cause when she started to glow like that. “...Yes?”

“I don’t think the ambassador is helping the queen.”
Zed blinked. “But...we just saw them conspiring!”

Sakurako drew her hands through her hair to keep from shaking him. “Yes, but remember how relaxed he was about the whole thing? What if the reason he didn’t care about any of her demands - and killing Kyo is a big damn demand- is because he knew none of it would happen? Don’t you see? He’s planning to betray the queen!”

“I...I can see what you’re saying, but-”

“Think about it logically: how could he possibly stand a threat to Kyo? If the queen couldn’t touch him; even the king couldn’t touch him, how on earth could a normal person hope to hurt Kyo?”

“I...well, yeah, but-”

“And that thing he said about how beautiful the flowers were at night? That’s courtly talk for complimenting the queen. And it ties back to what he said at the end, about the beautiful flowers dying!”

Zed finally looked persuaded. “It was pretty odd that he just stood there talking at the end...and how he said it was strange too. Almost like he was commenting on the situation to a friend of something-”

Sakurako cut him off with a wild look in her eye. “Exactly! Wait - you don’t think he knew we were there, do you?”

“He couldn’t have. Even the queen didn’t sense us. No, I think he was just talking to himself, Rako.”

“Well-”

“Ok, look! If Fujiwara is innocent, the king will probably know all about this by tomorrow morning. If not...we’ll have to take this into our own hands. And that means we need someone to tell.”

Stumped, Sakurako leaned back against the wall, sliding down until she sat huddled next to her friend. They sat there for a short time, thinking hard about all the trustworthy adults they knew. It was not a long list, which made things more complicated. Finally, Sakurako picked her head up off of her arms and sighed. “Ok. It’d be a stretch, but what about telling Kouji?”

“He’s the queen’s cousin-”

“Yeah, but he’s my cousin too! And he’s all about honor and justice! Who else could we tell? Besides, I think they had a fight, or something. The queen was pretty upset the day after he left; she even frightened the foreigner. And the queen didn’t really say why she didn’t ask for his protection - what if Kouji left to avoid the queen?”

Zed sighed. “And what if he didn’t?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure he’d still like to hear all about the treason.”

He spent a long moment mulling it over, pinching the bridge of his nose, and muttering to himself. “Fine. Let’s write him a letter in the morning. I just hope we don’t end up regretting this…”

...
“Have you given much thought to what you’ll do after the war?”

Takehiro glanced over at Kouji, wondering how on earth something like that connected to what they had been speaking of immediately prior. “Look, if this is about the fried fish stand, I was only joking-

“Fish stand?”

The rare kind sighed, taking a moment to hack away at several bamboo shoots in staged displeasure. “You weren’t even listening, were you? That’s why our relationship would never work out, you know. You just never listen.”

Now it was Kouji’s turn to sigh, although in exasperation. “How does Karin deal with you all the time? I suspect that she simply tunes you out, and I will be asking her how she does it as soon as we get back to camp. Also, the bamboo has done nothing to you. Leave it alone.”

Well someone was in a touchy mood. Takehiro would have to proceed carefully else he find himself hanging upside down, suspended by his bootstraps. “That is unfair to both Karin and myself, and possibly the bamboo, as well. You must know the forest is cursed, and we are very likely surrounded by evil flora. It’s merely a preemptive action. Don’t come crying to me when the bamboo knight challenges you to a duel, demanding satisfaction and all plant-based objects on your person. And cotton is plant based, you know. As is most cloth. I would most definitely laugh at you then, even if your muscles are intimidatingly large.”

This was exactly the kind of nonsense that Karin, who had gotten lamentably used to him, wouldn’t have batted an eyelash over. Hell, by this point, she would have continued on in the same vein. Kouji, however, had built up less of a resistance to Takehiro’s silliness and reacted accordingly. “I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but you are insane. I am fairly sure there are institutions for people like you. Argh. Let’s just get back to the matter at hand, shall we?”

Takehiro, who had by this point had spent enough time with his friend to know when he was about brood out loud, attempted to head him off. Besides, any post-war plans were difficult to discuss, as they centered around the needs of the enclave, and also Hideyoshi’s whims. “I don’t know, Kouji. We’ve taken a long enough break as it is. We really should get back to checking out the area for any signs of demons if we want to get back to camp tonight…” Even though it had been several weeks since they had brought down Belphegor, severely weakening the demon force, the situation was still dangerous. More than 30 men had been killed during a raid just 3 days ago, and since then Hideyoshi had only trusted his most powerful soldiers to act as scouts, in case of another ambush. The two men had been out for more than eight hours, and their concentration was wearing thin. Still, Takehiro knew it would be better to watch out for the enemy than having to lie to his friend.

“I am fully convinced you are capable of scouting and talking at the same time, Takehiro. Don’t try to deny it - the whole mushroom fiasco more than proves my point.”

Takehiro’s eyes narrowed. Both Shihoins had sworn never to bring up that particular incident ever
again. Faced with his friend’s treachery, Takehiro decided it was time to bring out the big guns. “Yes, well, the last time we were in the woods together a dragon concussed me, and broke two of your ribs. Let’s not risk it, shall we?”

As soon as he finished speaking he knew he had said precisely the wrong thing. “Risk it? Would that we be so lucky! Could you imagine how differently things would go now that you wouldn’t have to hold back?” Kouji’s eyes sparkled with excitement and the memory of bloodshed and personal pain. Any further proof of Kouji’s latent masochistic tendencies was totally unneeded. “But that is besides the point. Do you have post-war plans? Or are you only serving Hideyoshi for the time being?”

It was time for the final, yet most effective evasive tactic in his arsenal - to turn the question back onto Kouji. “To be honest, I’m not sure. What about yourself? Are you going to leave? Even with the queen...as she is?” He needed to say no more. Having personally witnessed her breakdown, Takehiro had relayed it to Kouji along with Hideyoshi in a private briefing. Afterwards, when it was just the two of them, Kouji had admitted there was more to the breakdown than what he had witnessed, and the whole history of her feelings for him was admitted, as well as his current struggle. Kouji had leaned towards leaving immediately after the war, with or without the king’s leave. Yet now that his royal cousin’s mental condition had worsened, Takehiro suspected this might change matters. He was banking on Kouji’s turmoil to distract him.

“Of course I’m going to leave. Hikari’s condition has made it imperative. Don’t look at me like that - I have to do what is best for both my cousins, not to mention myself. If I stay, Hikari will only get worse. There’s nothing I can do for her, and it’s kinder that I leave her alone.”

Takehiro had never considered it from that standpoint, and couldn't help but consider his own situation from that particular angle. After all, he was bound to the other rare kinds even if it was not necessarily the healthiest relationship either for him or for them. Cringing, he considered Aya, and conceded that Kouji had a point.

“Besides, it’s also a matter of protecting you and Karin. The two of you hold secrets that could easily get you killed, and as much as it pains me to say it, Hikari has proven herself untrustworthy. That she attempted to access Karin’s secrets like that...well, perhaps the term mental rape is too strong, but then again, perhaps not. Either way, if she tries that with any of us again, it would be the end for all of us.”

The rare kind winced. Red had told him immediately of her sister’s transgression, and both had been appropriately concerned. It had precipitated his visit to the enclave; trusting that Red would find a way to warn him in case his secret had been discovered. What he hadn’t expected was that Kouji would take the news so badly. While Red had been able to forgive her sister, worrying more about the queen’s state of mind than her own, Kouji had not. Takehiro suspected it had less to do with his strict honor code, and the fact that at heart, the man was a nurturer. A protector. A guardian and older brother figure to both Red and at times even himself. That Hikari had moved against her - and by extension of the secrets they shared, Takehiro - placed her in an unforgiving light, and he suspected it would be some time before Kouji brought himself to like her again. Future trust was out of the question.

“I’ve made some tentative plans. I broached the subject with Karin earlier, and she seems to think it would work, even if she’s torn about leaving Hikari. But here it is: we go abroad, beyond the king’s reach. We scour the world for power users and if we can find them, other rare kinds. Then, we make our own community, training them so that they’ll have a better hold on their power and not be a danger to the normal world. What do you think?”
For a long moment, Takehiro was too stunned to speak. All he could do was blink at his friend, and stare at him in mix of confusion and horror. Then, when he regained his facilities, “Are you mad? The king would never allow it! Hideyoshi’s told me all about the one, failed attempt at colonizing against the king’s will. We wouldn’t last a year if we didn’t have his permission, and he’ll never give it - even if he let Red and I leave, he’s far too proud to let you go!” Takehiro shook his head. “He’ll just see it as a veiled attack. Training power users beyond his reach? It’s one thing to train your unknown, female cousin, but to actively seek out power users? It’s like announcing that you’re raising an army. Not that I think you are, but that’s exactly what it looks like!”

Kouji smiled, but his answer was in earnest. “That’s why we need to put a little spin on it. Perhaps community is the wrong word...school might be better. If we tell him it’s to train and instruct non-japanese users, with the end goal of bringing them back to Takama ga hara, I think he might just go for it. Sort of like a boarding school. We’d just have to make it seem very western, very modern. Very useful. Don’t you think it could work?”

His head was still spinning, torn between incredulity and hope. “I...but...”

“Furthermore, there are no stigmas about rare kinds abroad; no fears about fallen angels and demons come to pass judgement and suck out our powers. Truthfully, so little is known of them that we could pass you off as possessing negation as your power. Think of it, Takehiro. You could live free, without watching your back or hiding your abilities. Wouldn’t that be better? Wouldn’t that be worth the risk?”

He had to swallow past the lump in his throat before he could respond. Truthfully, such a dream both dazzled and frightened him, and although it was sudden, he wanted it was a passion usually reserved for battle and protecting his people. To live free with friends at his side, living a normal life among people who wouldn’t fear him? To have a purpose beyond serving the very people he despised, and acting as an extension of the rare kind clan? Even the thought of training snot-nosed brats appealed to him! Yet it couldn’t be, not while his people still needed him. There were only a few who ever left the confines of the enclave, and their loyalty must be without question; otherwise the rare kinds' would be inevitable. That even this severe temptation didn’t sway him was a testament to Takehiro’s strength of will. He would have to let Kouji down gradually, when he had figured out an acceptable excuse. “I...I need to think. I’ll keep it a secret, even from Hideyoshi, but...I can’t give you an answer.”

Kouji seemed disappointed at his friend’s lack of enthusiasm, but he didn’t push him. “I understand. Living in fear of something your entire life is a difficult thing to push aside. But if I can convince the king, perhaps you’ll agree more readily. We will speak of this again, comrade. First we have a war to win.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was too happy. Go watch Twin Peaks, and remember why life is alternatively awesome and sometimes full of suck. The owls are not what they seem, and Agent Cooper nooooooooooo.

As always, this chapter is un beta’d. I apologize for all the mistakes.
Sakura thought there was something exquisitely nostalgic about sleeping in her father’s new home. Although it had been completely rebuilt since its destruction during the war against Eden, it had been remade to the exact specifications - leaky roof and all - of the old mansion. She appreciated it, and knew that the appreciation marked her as her father’s daughter. Ogami and the others did not, and she knew for a fact that his roof - only one thin wall away from hers - leaked more than the others.

Sakura sighed as she rolled over on the futon, staring at the wall separating her and Ogami’s rooms. He hadn’t slept in the mansion for almost a week, now, and she suspected she knew why. She knew that she had been weak in hugging him, but the moment had called for it! His mother’s death had haunted him for years, and to see her so happy and alive had hurt even her, who had, paradoxically, the least interaction with Rin. He had begged her to look after Code:Emperor, yet there had been something fragile in his expression, so much so that she couldn’t help but touch him. So she burrowed herself against him and he had let her; holding onto her tightly, the closest they had been in six years. It had only been a moment, but it was still too much - as soon as he pressed his lips to the crown of her head, he had come to his senses. He pushed her away from him, and the pained expression on his face as he left her alone with Code:Emperor made her want to cry.

Sakura pressed her face into the pillow. God, she was foolish. Ogami was right - there was a world of difference between seeing someone and touching someone, and if he had held her for a moment more she would have been completely undone. Yet perhaps she already was. Here she was laying awake at night thinking about him, even though she had promised herself she would let him go into the sea of her memories, only to be reflected on when she was old and grey. Although perhaps this wasn’t entirely her fault. The room was so inundated with his scent that she was practically drowning in it, and it made thinking of him all too easy. The way he moved when fighting her father...the gleam in his eye that no longer meant death was imminent...the tightness of his mouth, reflecting the tension in his shoulders...the strength in his arms when he had held her-

Enough! Sakura sat up abruptly, breathing deeply, eyes closed. She would not lose to this. She would not.

If she failed now, Ogami would know just how weak she was, and make sure to stay away from her. If she wanted a chance to talk him back into her life - even in a limited capacity - she had to prove she was strong enough to handle this.

Yet going back to sleep was currently impossible. Perhaps a glass of milk might soothe her. Sakura tiptoed down the creaky stairs, wondering at her father’s thoroughness as she did. How could he recreate the entire mansion down to each and every squeak? It came to her as she reached the
landing. He’d had nearly a century to grow accustomed to his old home. What else had he learned and lost in that amount of time?

Muffled voices in the kitchen stilled her progress, and she quieted her breathing so she might not be overheard. Kouji’s voice was slightly louder than the rest, and if he were up in the middle of the night, he was likely talking to his old friends. She crept forward, straining her impeccable hearing, and was rewarded with her father’s voice. “Knowing Asura’s location is all well and good, but until we figure out who - or what - is summoning the demons, the threat won’t end. When Sakurako and Zed get here, we’ll have a better idea, but-”

“Will Sakurako’s powers even work on the demons? They certainly didn’t then. And if Zed doesn’t stabilize, there’s no way we can separate them” Karin interrupted him, sounding exhausted. For the first time, Sakura wondered about what it must be like, being connected to an ancient dragon. No one had explained how such a thing was possible, merely saying it was the least of their current worries. Yet the repercussions couldn’t be good, especially if she was actively working to keep the dragon subdued as well as training the Code:breakers.

“That remains to be seen. I wouldn’t underestimate either of them, however. They are two of the Founders, after all.”

There was the quiet sound of a cup being placed on the table and then Kouji spoke. “We’ll be splitting into two, regardless. Three, if whoever is manipulating the demons is not with them. We need to begin planning for contingencies. Karin, you’ll be facing Asura, obviously. If at all possible, I’d like to be there as well.”

Sakura could practically hear her father’s smirk. “And Kouji wants to fight another dragon. They could hear my surprise in Bangladesh. I’m not sure if it will work out that cleanly, however. There’s the matter of splitting the Code:Breakers up, and for each to face an opponent that won’t exploit their weakness. And...we may have another problem.”

“Oh?”

Her father drew out his reply, as if every word was precious. “There may be complications with Pandora’s Box…”

“The box again? I thought your daughter unmade it.”

“Yes. At least, we thought so. The negation from December 32nd has been undone, at least. But until we know what happened to your father’s box, we can’t be sure.”

“You think they’re connected?” Kouji spoke again, interest shading his tone.

“It would explain a lot. Not the least being how four small children - one of whom that wasn’t even in the room when the disaster took place - were hurtled through time. If Hikari’s box is what we suspect, then it is not only imperative we find the box to end the threat, but also to determine whether or not Pandora’s Box has truly been destroyed.”

Sakura’s heart stilled in her chest. Pandora’s Box had been the vehicle for so much pain and devastation, and she had been its creator. That she had ultimately been its destroyer as well did not fully soothe, especially as she had relied on Ogami to find the strength to do so. Yet it was not time to castigate herself about her childhood mistakes. If the box was not completely destroyed, she had work to do.

Sakura burst into the kitchen, for once surprising every person at the table. They had all been so
deep in conversation that even her father hadn't realized she had been listening in. Throwing her hands down dramatically on the table, she made her position clear. "Excuse me for eavesdropping, but I respectfully ask to be included in this conversation. Think of it as a matter of professional pride, as creator of the damned box. Also, I'll wake up everyone in the house if you say no."

Kouji watched her with barely veiled amusement. "Well when you put it that way..."

The look her father shot him was decidedly unamused. "Kouji. And I'm not sure what you overheard, darling, but-"

Sakura glared at him, ignoring Karin and Kouji's snickers of amusement at his hurt expression. "Do not attempt to placate me, Father. You're going to have me to tell me regardless. If I didn't destroy it, I'll have to try again, and it's in everyone's best interest that I know all there is to know. I think you remember how close we came to losing last time, when everyone kept their secrets like their lives depended on it. I remember my past, now. So please, tell me what you suspect!"

After a long look with his two friends, her father sighed and buried his face in his hands. He held himself there for a long moment, debating the pros and cons of involving her. When he picked his head up, however, his eyes were determined. "There is much we don't know, and won't until Sakurako and Zed arrive. Yet what we do know is this: there is a connection between Pandora's box and Hikari's, although how they connected is a question we are unable to answer. Yet both boxes housed the impossible, and bent the rules of time and space. Even worse, there is a good chance that both boxes may be able to keep someone from dying, as well."

Sakura's head shot up. She knew that Nenene had been preserved through the power of Pandora's Box, but the other box had only been featured once in the dream, as a benign gift. Yet she had the feeling that had she asked, they would only tell her she would find out in time. So she forged onwards, facing the problem with her characteristic practicality. "So what can we do? Pandora's box is physically destroyed...so what could be keeping it a threat? I guess what I mean to say is...how do we fix a problem that's intangible?"

"By removing the power source," Karin murmured, wincing a little as she did. "And that could very well be Hikari's box. If we'd only done it then..."

"Yet the boxes could be different," her father argued. "And Hikari's box was lost. We could never verify that it wasn't destroyed."

"On how many legs does a table stand," Kouji whispered, clearly lost in some old memory. "If only she had been more coherent at the end..."

Sakura's weighted breath interrupted their musings. "I don't know anything about Hikari's box, but there's another possibility, isn't there? I could be the power source. After all, I created and thought that I'd destroyed it, as well. Yet if Pandora's box still somehow exists...then perhaps I'm not the only person powering whatever is left. Ai and Ogami must be contributing to it as well. And Mishiru...if she's here now when she wasn't present for December 32nd, she must have some connection to it as well. Perhaps the answer lies within the four of us." Sakura closed her eyes as her thoughts spun together, revealing the answer if only she could puzzle it out. "Or perhaps...as long as we're together..." For a moment she thought she had it, an idea gleaming brightly against the mire of unknowns. Yet then it was gone, and she exhaled roughly. "Or maybe I'm just babbling. I'm sorry."

Karin smiled tiredly as she reached across the table to squeeze Sakura's hand. "Don't be. At this point we can do is discuss and brainstorm, and look at the issue from all angles. Your insight is greatly appreciated, Sakura. Do not fret; the answer will come in time."
Her father stood, kissing her on the cheek. "Perhaps things will be clearer in the morning. For now, my bed calls. We can discuss this again while the others are training, darling. Sweet dreams, everyone."

... ...

Sakurako and Zed must have arrived in the middle of the night, as they were sitting in the kitchen early the next morning, even before Rui began making breakfast. Having witnessed firsthand the synchronicity developed during their childhood, their differences struck Rui all the more: while Sakurako sat sipping tea in her usual provocative outfit, bright-eyed and perfectly put together, Zed looked, in a word, exhausted. His light hair was raggedly pulled back, his suit hung ill-fitting on his worryingly thin frame, and there were defined dark circles under his eyes. Rui was shocked and backed away instinctively. Was he slipping into his lost form? Or was he merely extremely ill?

They sat silently, clearly waiting for someone or something with unexpected patience, especially considering Sakurako’s impetuosity. Deciding it might as well be her (besides, she absolutely wanted to witness Sakurako’s and Shibuya’s reunion after all this time. Maybe she would stab him with her magical katana! Maybe he would even cry!) she strode into the kitchen, acting surprised to see them there. “Oh! Good morning. You two have finally arrived - should I go get Shibuya?”

“Might not be a bad idea,” Zed murmured under his breath, and it drew a sharp look from Sakurako. Before she could say anything, however, he continued. “Mornin’, baby doll! What’d we miss?”

Rui had almost forgotten how girl crazy Zed was, even after all this time. She had definitely forgotten how he’d always focused on her. Fighting down her angry blush, she chose to address Sakurako, rather than Zed. “Well, we’ve heard quite a bit about the kingdom of Takama ga hara...as well as the people telling it. In real time, we’ve trained, undergone some sort of blood test—” (Here, Sakurako snorted and Zed grinned, and Rui wouldn’t be surprised had they already known or suspected) “and dealt with a lot of...tension. Oh. And in case you didn’t know, Yukihina’s pregnant.”

Judging by Zed’s fleeting, pained look, they had already known. His partner didn’t seem to care, however. She merely placed her teacup down on the table and fixed Rui with a fearsome look. “Yes, yes, we know. Now, tell us what we really want to know, Rui.” She paused for dramatic effect. “How far have you gone with Kouji?”

Rui groaned as all the blood in her body shot to her face. “Shut up! No-nothing! I mean, it’s none of yo-your business!”

Sakurako’s cheeks split in an evil grin, and Rui knew her business or not, she was not going to let it go. Yet before either woman could speak - or Zed could attempt an innuendo or two - Sakura strode into the kitchen, clearly distracted. “Good morning, Prince. Father? I’ve been thinking—” Everyone in the kitchen froze as Sakura’s eyes fell on Zed, who she had mistaken for her father. Her eyes flicked over to Sakurako, who sat still as a statue with her eyes locked on her daughter, pale-faced and serious. It had been long years since they had met, and in their initial meeting, she
had sliced her only child in half with her katana. Magical properties aside, it paved the way for one hell of an awkward reunion.

Before either Sakurakouji could move, Zed stood and pulled Rui from the room. “Let them have their moment,” he muttered. “I’ve got to find Shibuya, anyway. Which one is his room?”

He had his arm around her but wasn’t hitting on her in the slightest. He must be very ill, indeed. Deciding to take advantage of his seriousness, Rui interrogated him she lead him to Shibuya’s room. “So? Any word on the dragon? Or those ‘secondary vibrations?’ How about Hikari’s Box?” Sakura hadn’t been the only one keeping her ear to the ground, although the only reason she knew to ask about Hikari’s Box was because she had heard Sakura mumbling about it when she had made her way back to her room last night. She’d gone out to take a walk (and drink a little whisky) and she’d come back at just the right moment to learn that they may have larger problems than even the dragon.

Zed kept his eyes straight ahead, even as he stumbled into the wall. “Questions later, my sexy, slow-moving friend. Or is it Kouji who’s slow-moving, and you who’s long-suffering? Regardless. All will be revealed. First, I have to stop dying.”

Now that he mentioned it, she could feel it: the icy advance of death creeping along her arm. A quick glance confirmed that his skin was flaking away, leaving patches of bone along his cheekbones. When he met her eyes, she could see a peculiar emptiness within them, as if death were an empty room he was entering in. This was different than the other times she had seen him turn, and could only suppose, as she hustled him down the hallway to Shibuya’s room, that it was somehow connected to their present situation.

She banged on the door with her fist, feeling the right side of her body go numb. Thankfully, Shibuya threw open the door, instinctively opening his arms when Zed launched himself into them. Rui shivered, swathing her body in shadow to chase away Zed’s tendrils of death.

Zed, who Rui was beginning to suspect was an equal opportunity lover or simply extremely irreverent, nuzzled his face happily into Shibuya’s chest. “Take me, darling,” he purred, and his quickening slide into death halted immediately. “Make me feel alive.”

Shibuya rolled his eyes, grimacing as he saw Rui’s grin. “It is too damn early for this. How did you get this bad? Isn’t Sakurako handling it? I thought you two had a system!”

“The system is currently a lot of work. Especially when we are out saving the world, or when Prince Bootylicious and your daughter walk into the kitchen without a whole lot of warning.”

Shibuya and Rui wore matching frowns. Yet Zed was hanging on to Shibuya like a monkey on a tree, and rather than scold him, she decided to store away memories of this to embarrass both men later. Shibuya seemed to catch onto that as he glanced up at her. “Ok, Prince. Breakfast as usual, and as soon as I get him back to normal we’ll begin today’s session. Make sure Sakurako doesn’t stab anyone with her sword. That is all.”

He shut the door behind him, and Zed let out an exaggerated, unmanly squeal of delight. From behind the door she could hear Shibuya’s muffled response. Zed, you worry me. You cannot fall for my manly charm so easily. My ex-wife will probably fight you for me, and then where would we be?

Rui snickered, padding back down the hallway to her room. If Shibuya was able to crack jokes, Zed’s condition was probably ok. Yet she was in no hurry to head back down and start breakfast. She would give mother and daughter in the kitchen some time to bond, and Shibuya and Zed some time to fix...whatever was wrong with Zed. Assured that all her questions would be answered in due
time, Rui simply looked forward to today's session, and a morning nip of whiskey.

Several hours later, when all had been healed, fed, and arrayed in Shibuya's living room, Rui realized her enthusiasm may have been misplaced. For one thing, Sakurako had placed her daughter onto her lap just as Inoichi had done, scowling at all who came near. Sakura bore this with a carefully crafted mask of ease, although sweat beaded at her temples. Toki could barely contain his laughter, yet kept close to Yuuki, going so far as to sit on him to keep him from doing something truly stupid, like asking if Sakura wanted to sit on his lap next.

For another, Shibuya and Sakurako's reunion had been a complete disappointment. These people hadn't seen each other in over 80 years, and yet they been completely normal. No tears, no stabbing with katanas, not even a moment of awkwardness. They had simply hugged each other with Sakura in the middle (as per Sakura's demand) and then stood at opposite corners of the room; Shibuya next to Kouji, Sakurako next to Zed.

Worst of all, however, was Zed. She had been hopeful that their earlier interlude spelled the dawning of a new maturity, or that his skirt chasing had calmed down. Better yet, she had hoped he would flirt with Maka, who was a beauty by all standards. Yet her hopes had been dashed when Maka and Zed saw each other, and the waves of animosity were thick enough that she could slice and serve them for dinner. Whatever their history, it was clear that she would be offering Rui no respite now.

She had cringed as Zed settled next to her, sending a laughing glance over at the Amazon as he did. This decided it- they had always been partners in crime, and now they had turned their efforts towards tormenting her. Rui pointedly looked away from him, eyes falling on Kouji. She meant to look away immediately, *(Darkness, could she be any more obvious?)* but there was something in his expression that caught her attention. His eyes were narrow, and his body was tense with focus...and his lips had flattened down into a thin line. Even someone who hadn't spent years living with him could tell that he was upset. Yet why? What could have possibly happened since Sakurako and Zed arrived that would have him so put out?

Zed's arm snaked around her shoulder, and Kouji grit his teeth. With a flare of excitement deep in her heart, she suspected she had discovered the cause of his anger. Yet darkness abounds, if he was jealous why the hell wasn't he taking what was obviously his already? Had her confession six years ago been ignored? Could she have possibly been misunderstood?

No, even Kouji couldn't be that dense...

Shibuya ignored the ripples of unease spreading throughout the room, nodding instead to his ex-wife. "Now that Sakurako and Zed are back, it's time to go into a little more detail about what we'll soon be facing. As a few of you know, Asura is not the only threat - Sakurako and Zed have been investigating rumors of demons for the last several months."

He gestured to his ex-wife, and she took up the narrative, retelling her and Zed's last few months, casually revealing some of Eden's old secrets as she did so. Hiding places, data, methods of tracking non-human spikes of power...all was laid bare as she described their hunt for their ancient enemies. They had travelled the world, chasing down whispers and fear, yet in the end their path had lead them back to Japan.

Yet when they had returned, they made an inauspicious discovery. No longer did they need to rely on outside sources; they could feel the demons themselves. Zed was especially affected, and as the weeks had stretched on was hard pressed to withstand the siren call that drew him into death...and
the demon’s power. Were it not for Sakurako’s power over life and their time-tested bond, he might have been lost. As it was, they had managed to discover three things before Shibuya had called them back to the mansion. One, that the demons were originating from Takama ga hara, still hidden from modern man and technology by ancient arts. Secondly, that while the demons were rising, they had not yet reached the point where they could fully take form. This was good news, as it meant that there was still time to determine the source and extinguish it before the demons could coalesce and attack.

Thirdly, that the demons were not moving concurrently with the dragon. This was bad news, as it meant that something - or someone - was controlling the demons separately, meaning that the Code:Breakers and their allies would have to target three foes simultaneously, one of which was unknown. They guessed that the instigator would be on the island along with the demons, but they couldn’t be sure. Especially as there was still the matter of-

“Stop touching her.”

Everyone looked over at Kouji, whose angry growl had unceremoniously interrupted Sakurako in the middle of her report. Then, everyone looked around themselves, wondering what he was reacting to. Such was her absorption in Sakurako’s report that it took Rui a long moment to realize he was speaking to Zed, of her - the death adept had taken to running his thumb gently along her collarbone, in a distracted, yet still flirtatious motion. She jerked away immediately, blushing to the roots of her hair and anxiously rubbing her collarbone until it was red. Zed merely shrugged and raised his hands, smirking annoyingly.

“Sorry, sorry. Didn’t know she was spoken for.”

Everyone glanced over at Kouji in varying levels of veiled interest. Among the least discreet were Toki and Yuuki, who watched with wide eyes and identical, mischievous grins. Yet Kouji said nothing, and when he made to leave the room, Rui saw red. That was it? After all that buildup and losing his temper, he was just going to walk away? This was completely unacceptable, and Rui responded drastically. “Excuse me? You little boys can play your games somewhere else, ‘cuz I am no one’s plaything. That being said: Zed, you’re a lecher; grow up. And Kouji? It’s not up to you who appreciates me. Especially when last I checked, I didn’t belong to you.”

Charged stillness descended upon the room, and more than one jaw fell open. At her side, Zed dropped the apple he’d been munching on, and sent a fleeting, panicked glance at Sakurako. None of this stopped Toki from murmuring under his breath what only Yuuki could make out as you go girl. The enormity of her outburst hit Rui all at once, and she began to tremble. Very, very rarely had she ever disagreed with Kouji, and never about something so trivial as this. It wasn’t trivial to her, however, and after six years of waiting without a clear yes or no, she was at the end of her rope. She fixed Kouji’s back with her sternest expression, offset by her flushed face and trembling stance, willing him to turn and face her squarely. Yet he never did. He simply walked from the room, and Rui felt all her hopes deflate with every step he took.

Heat prickled at her eyelids, and she had to look down at the floor. She missed the wary, pitying glances everyone in the room threw her way, but she couldn’t miss the small hands that gripped her own. She blinked away her tears to see Sakura had moved next to her, looking up at her with that empathetic, determined expression that had made Rei fall in love with her. For once, her sorrow overpowered her modesty, and the urge to head bash Sakura was replaced with the need to accept her comfort. So she didn’t resist as Sakura pulled her into the kitchen, sitting her down at a chair and holding her, much as a mother would a child.

They stayed like that for a long time, Rui crying quietly as Sakura rocked her, murmuring soothing
reassurances into her hairline. It went against the grain to be consoled like this, and she could have accepted it from no one else - only Sakura knew exactly what she was going through, and had even less hope than she. Yet their quiet moment alone was interrupted before long. Yuuki soon came bounding in, bristling with rage and close to entering his adult, platinum-haired form. It took Toki and Rei’s team effort to keep him from chasing after Kouji and demanding satisfaction - especially as both of them looked as if they wouldn’t mind pummeling Kouji either. Had Heike been there, with his cryptic comments and trigger-happy whip hand, it would have been a perfect Code:Breaker reunion. As it was, their antics and the nostalgia was enough to make Rui stop crying and laugh instead.

Maybe Kouji would never love her back. As long as she had her friends, however, she would be just fine.

Chapter End Notes

Do you know how long this chapter took to finish? DO YOU?? (I do. It is shameful).

Also, girl power. Who needs men? WHO? (Not me. NOT ME.)
Ruthlessness

Chapter Summary

In which a war is won.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1899

As the army made their way south, clearing the land of demons as they went, they eventually made their way to the field marshal’s hometown. It was here that he made the unhappy discovery that his wife had moved back home, disregarding both his explicit instructions to stay at the capitol, as well as the obvious danger to herself and her children. More oddly still, she had left her newborn son with his wetnurse back at the palace, under his Fujiwara Souri’s care. The conversation that followed was, as Takehiro gleefully told Karin later, a total disaster. Had the field marshal been a man to throw plates, shards would have lined the kitchen floor. As it was Hideyoshi had gone glacial with rage, and the Lady Hanako had retaliated with such bitterness that Takehiro had eventually been forced to leave the room. It had been an incredibly uncomfortable situation to listen in on, and oh, by the way, you’re in love with him, right?

Karin had whacked him soundly on the arm, hoping to get lucky and hit a nerve. She hadn’t, but felt vindicated when he had winced and pouted, mumbling something about how all the women he knew abused him. Karin couldn’t help but grin. Even though Takehiro pretty much knew she had a crush on their superior, such a reaction was necessary. It was the principle of the thing, after all.

Currently, principles were all she had to fall back on. Thanks to the lull in the action the army was at a standstill, awaiting the king’s orders or another demon incursion. This left more than enough time for the field marshal to scold his wife, drill the army mercilessly, and bask in the acclaim of his newly finished poem. For Love of the Ocean had barely been finished for a week before it began its meteoric rise in popularity, travelling largely by word of mouth as the field marshal refused to waste anyone’s time on writing out copies when the kingdom was at war. That being so, its overtones of hopeless love and seeking hope through despair resonated within the hearts of all who heard it, and its ambiguity was enough to make the listener question whether it was actually a love poem, or an allegorical retelling of the war. Coupled with the flawless rhythm, elegance of his phrasing, and the evocative beauty of his language, it was no wonder it quickly became Fujiwara Hideyoshi’s most highly acclaimed work.

Even though she knew it would only hurt her more, Karin had gotten Takehiro to read it through for her just before it was published, and once more a week later. She wasn’t sure she couldn’t handle anything more than that. Some of the lines were so poignant that had she been alone, she might have sat and cried. As it was, they brought on a sense of deep melancholy, and oddly enough, made her long for her mother’s home. Originally she had been overcome by her feelings for the field marshal, augmented by the lustre of his poetry. Yet on the second hearing, she was struck more by the sense of otherness he attempted to describe - women of ice who swam through the water with supernatural ease; trees that entrapped sleeping victims and then ate their dreams,
and skies of roiling blues and greys, shielding the path from heavens to the earth. Many aspects of the poem inexplicably reminded her of home...yet she was not brave enough to ask Kouji if he felt the same. She worried that he may see past her reasonings that hid her feelings, and she’d be damned if she gave Kouji anything else to worry about - the last thing he needed was another lovesick Shihoin!

Through those long days of waiting the only way she could release her pent up feelings was by training with the other members of the Shadow Unit. At this point the field marshal didn’t even come to watch them train, knowing them to be the harshest critics on each other and themselves. This was fortunate, as it meant she could fight with no distractions, and that the three of them could go all out on each other. Karin had even begun practicing the technique she had used on Kyo with Kouji, after fully explaining her hypothesis, and how she was able to grab hold of the blood within his veins. They quickly discovered that her lack of control was not simply a matter of her grasp on her power - the longer she used her blood manipulation ability, the higher chance there was of the power rebounding onto her and forcing her from her senses, making her act in a crazed manner. It became imperative that Takehiro would always position himself close to her, so that he could grab her and sever her from her ability at an instant’s notice, otherwise she could seriously harm Kouji and herself.

Still - slowly - her endurance was increasing, and she could now go almost three minutes without losing her hold on her power, and her sanity. This was a marked improvement from the approximate thirty seconds she had been able to hold Kyo. Although there was a noticeable difference in power between her cousin and the heir of the country...

When it was just Takehiro and herself - Kouji being called away to train with the other elite power users, or to attend Hideyoshi on business (it was odd how the field marshal had chosen Kouji as a confidant, and she knew that Takehiro felt slighted) they practiced the external use of her power, albeit very carefully. She favored this kind of training, although it was harder to hide, as it was also less likely to drive her mad. It was also easier to augment with her wind ability, and made her feel less like she was some sort of spider, manipulating those she touched with invisible strings of blood.

. It was during one such training session that the status quo was disrupted. Takehiro had battled her to a standstill, as he so often did. Although she had greatly improved since her arrival in Japan, she still lacked the ruthlessness needed to attain the next level. She was still too soft-hearted, and even though her special power was on par - if not greater than, due to her secondary ability - with Kouji’s, she would never be as able a warrior as they if she could not let herself go. She glanced up at Takehiro ruefully, knowing from his dark expression she was about to earn herself a scolding.

She was not wrong. “Honestly, Red. You have got to get over this mental block. You’re good, but you need to be better. What if you have to fight a demon king on your own? With us you’re fine, but if we were separated-”

The voice that interrupted him was young, tiny, firm, and utterly unexpected. “Don’t be mean to Karin!”

Takehiro yelped in surprise, windmilling his arms as he fell back. He was able to keep his footing, but just. Karin’s giggle was swallowed by her surprise as her eyes turned to Fujiwara Maka, who had somehow managed to enter their training session without either noticing them, approach them silently, and then attempt to stand up for her. She took in the little girl’s determined stance and slightly furrowed brow - she was trying to look threatening, how precious! Her heart swelled. Opening her arms, she called out to the girl. “Come here, dearling.”
Maka threw herself into her arms, burrowing herself into Karin’s embrace. After a long moment, she turned her little face to glance back at Takehiro, impishly sticking out her tongue. Takehiro gaped, and Karin couldn’t help but laugh aloud.

“What the- how did…? Who is that?” Takehiro sputtered, and Maka must have found this amusing, for she turned a bit more so the man could see her giggle.

“Takehiro!” Maka beamed, all attempt at protecting Karin’s honor forgotten.

Utterly befuddled - and slightly nervous - Takehiro fixed Karin with his best no-nonsense expression. “Red. You have five seconds to tell me who this tiny creature is, and how she knows my name.”

Karin chose to address Maka, instead. “Up, little one. We must make our introductions properly!” When the girl stood and bowed, Karin placed a gentle hand on her head. “This is Fujiwara Maka, the youngest - well, but one, now - child of the field marshal. She is five years old, and her special power is reading and transmitting memories. That is how she knows your name, as she saw you fight demons with me.”

“And what else did she see?”

“Nothing. She has no idea about your special ability, all she wanted to know was what the demons were...and if you had curly hair.”

Takehiro visibly relaxed, even managing to crack a small grin at the girl. Then he bowed obsequiously, as a courtier might before a noble lady. “Well met, Lady Fujiwara. I am Shibuya Takehiro, your father’s man. Do you accompany him today?”

Karin, who had opened her mouth to scold him for speaking so to a child, promptly shut it. The oddness of her appearance aside, how had Maka made her way to the training grounds? She was only five, for Heaven’s sake! Surely the field marshal must have brought her here, but even as a joke - which she had seen the field marshal attempt on only one or two occasions- he would never allow her to wander into the ring where she and Takehiro sparred!

Although young, Maka understood the basic gist of Takehiro’s speech. She looked down at her feet, guiltily. “I just wanted to say hello...Papa said Karin was here! So I looked and looked and looked…” She glanced up, large eyes welling with tears. “Am I in trouble?”

Karin and Takehiro exchanged panicked glances. Neither had an overlarge experience of handing out punishment to children, preferring to coddle rather than to discipline. Yet the idea of the field marshal’s daughter running about unchecked in the middle of the army was terrifying. She had been unaccountably lucky to have found them without running into harm or even any other concerned bystander.

Seeing as how Maka was close to tears, Karin bent down and consoled her. “No, no, dear. Not with us. We’re just worried for you! It’s very dangerous to wander about the army - who knows what could happen!”

Maka’s lips turned inwards, and her eyes shifted to the left. The evasion was obvious, and Karin’s own eyes widened. “Maka - dearling. How did you find us?”

“I looked.”

When it was obvious nothing else was forthcoming, Karin tried again. “For how long?”
The girl held up three fingers, bashfully hiding her head. Karin stroked it absently as she prompted the girl.

“Three hours?”

“...times.”

Takehiro groaned, and Karin bit her lip. That the girl had come out in search of her three times was incredibly dangerous, and she had the luck of the gods that nothing had happened to her before now. It was also unbelievable dedication, especially when they had only met once. Had she truly made so large an impact on this young girl’s life?

...Or were matters at home so desperate that she had been forced to look for help elsewhere? Karin suspected she was the only adult Maka knew who had taken her seriously, and perhaps it was that which had prompted the little girl to search her out. Either way, something was wrong, and needed to change. It would be simpler if Maka were simply willful - she could begin training, perhaps, and distract herself thusly. If it were a matter of avoiding someone at home, however, her options were limited.

For the first time, Karin allowed herself to truly dislike Lady Fujiwara. Before, she had always scolded herself, unsure of whether it was the actual woman she disliked, or the fact that she was the field marshal’s wife. Now, she knew. What kind of mother allowed her daughter to run free like this? Ah, but perhaps she didn’t - “Maka, dear. Does your mother know where you are?”

Maka shook her head decisively, yet her blank expression did not change.

“And what about your maids? Your caretakers?”

Maka frowned. “No. Should they? They watch the twins, not me.”

Takehiro saw the line of Karin’s questioning, and took over. “Then who watches you, little one?”

Maka scuffed her toe at the dirt. “Mama. But she’s sleeping, or in her room, or talking to people. She doesn’t look for me until dinner. And I wanted to play! So I found you. Is that ok?”

Perhaps Takehiro could see how little Karin was able to respond, noting her body quivering with anger. “Of course. But perhaps it would be best to play at your home? Then you would not need to come looking for Karin all the time. We can arrange it with your father, if you’d like?”

Maka nodded happily and bounded over to Takehiro. She pulled on his hand before he could react, and - with a quick glance at Karin, who nodded absently - he bent down when she tugged again. She leaned in to place a quick kiss on his cheek, giggling delightedly when he straightened, eyes wide with surprise. “You’re very nice and very handsome. I like you. So you should come and play too!”

Karin snickered at Takehiro’s lack of composure, but adopted a straight face when Maka turned back to her. Stooping down, she picked up the girl, amazed at how light she was. “I’m sure Takehiro the Heartthrob would love to play with you as well, Maka. But for now, let’s get you back home, yes? If we’re lucky, no one will even know that you’re gone-”

Takehiro made a strangled gasp, and a quick glance at his face proved he was staring in horror at the entrance. Feeling a cold prickle of fear in her gut, Karin’s head spun around as she tightening her grip on Maka. What she saw there caused her to wince, and for Maka to bury her face into Karin’s neck out of fear.
In the doorway stood the field marshal, looking every inch as furious as she’d guiltily imagined he’d looked when facing off with his wife. Karin knew exactly how this looked, and the fear he would feel when he had stumbled across the two of them interacting with his daughter outside the confines of her home. He strode towards them, and Maka, who had snuck a peek, whimpered. Karin breathed deeply and set her shoulders just as he reached them.

“Hideyoshi! What a surprise - we were just on our way to see you. We’d just made the acquaintance of your lovely daughter, and were heading out to deliver her to you. It seems she’d gotten ah...a bit lost and—”

Fujiwara cut off Takehiro’s attempt to salvage the situation without taking his eyes off of Karin and the child she held. For her part, Karin attempted to meet his charged glare with her best attempt at equanimity. “Spare me, Takehiro. Shihoin - give her to me.”

Reluctantly, Karin did so. Maka made things difficult by clutching at her neck. Karin supposed she was afraid to be privy to her father’s rage, knowing it to be earned by her actions. Fujiwara lost his patience when Maka began to whimper. “Maka, come. This is no place for you - everywhere outside of home is dangerous and when I find the servant that allowed you to run free, I’ll—”

Maka began to cry in earnest now, and the sight of the man she loved holding his weeping child caused something in her to snap. “Servant indeed. Do you not even know who has control over your children? Are you so little involved with your family that you don’t know who is in charge of whom?” This was not fair, as the field marshal had been in charge of the war against unearthly creatures, and what man in his position would know such things even had that not been the case? Yet her anger had made her foolish and she ignored Takehiro’s attempts to get her to stop by taking her by the shoulder in an effort to drag her away. “And perhaps you should ask yourself this: how does a five-year-old manage to keep sneaking out of your house? Because this isn’t the first time, Field Marshal. And why should she do that? Maka knows it is dangerous - so why does she keep trying to escape? What is so important to her that she leaves behind the safety of her home?”

“No. Listen to me. You have no idea what it’s like to be powerful and alone, and without a way to make anyone listen to you. To be abused because you know more than you should, even if you’d never use it against them. To be feared, rather than loved. But she does. Your daughter does, and if all you can do is scold her for trying to make her life a safer, happier place - without ever asking why she does all this - then you are not the man I thought you were.”

Maka and Takehiro watched her with identical shocked expressions. Having stopped crying partway through Karin’s diatribe, Maka then glanced between her father and Karin, as if unsure which one was the more dangerous. Karin held the field marshal’s unreadable expression as long as she could, but the enormity of what she had just said hit her at once, leaving her pale and trembling in its wake. She should never have said any of that, and until she’d had no idea how deep the depths of her anger had stretched until it was too late. Yet it was all true, and now that she had said it, she could not take it back.

Her fear got the best of her, and she closed her eyes as she inhaled raggedly. Now the field marshal would hate her. Such a man would never forget or forgive that kind of treatment, and in one fell swoop she had lost the trust and respect of the one man she had ever-

“Maka, look at me.”

Karin’s eyes flew open. Fujiwara addressed his daughter with such gentleness, it made her heart throb in her chest. Would that he address her with that tone…! But no, even his grudging respect
for her must be gone now, in the face of her wild accusations. Maka cautiously met her father’s gaze, and she unconsciously began to rub the left side of her chest. “Yes, Papa?”

“Are you afraid of Takehiro?”

The oddness of the question took everyone by surprise, and it seemed to settle Maka’s nervousness. “No, Papa.”

“And what about Karin?”

She smiled shyly. “Nuh uh. I like them.”

“Is that why you went looking for them?”

Karin suddenly wondered just how long the field marshal had overheard before making his presence known. The man had an undeniable skill of skulking in the shadows and emerging at just the right moment. If he had heard even a little of his wife’s inattention... yet Karin wondered what he could possibly do. The lady was the queen of the home, and even were he to take a more active role in his children’s upbringing, the kingdom was at war. At least until the demons were defeated, nothing could change. Karin felt all the injustice of her accusation, and wished even more that she could take it back.

“Well… a little bit…” Maka glanced down as she pressed her small hands together to hide her nervousness.

“And how did you know where to find them?”

Maka went stiff as a board. She glanced worriedly over at Karin.

“It’s all right, Maka. Just tell him. He won’t be angry.” The softness in her tone made both men glance over at her, although Karin was initially too afraid to look at the field marshal. She kept her gaze on his daughter, and smiled gently.

“Ok. I knew where they were ‘cuz I saw it. From you, Papa. When you came home those days ago and hugged me and you were thinking about them and the other man they play with. I’m sorry, Papa. But you were thinking really hard!”

All three adults froze, for a variety of reasons. Maka, oblivious, kept on. “And it took me a while ‘cuz the all stations looked the same and you kept trying not to look at them even though you were thinking about them so I wasn’t sure where they were, and-”

Karin and Takehiro relaxed minutely. The initial fear that the field marshal had seen them sparring and using Karin’s secondary ability had passed, as they never practiced externally when Kouji was there. As he was the only candidate for ‘the other man they played with’ Maka had seen, if Fujiwara hadn’t watched them closely it was unlikely he would have discovered her secret.

Although Fujiwara’s shoulders were stiff, his voice was deceptively gentle as he interrupted his daughter. “I see, child. And do you see thoughts like this from your siblings?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“And your mother?”

Maka’s lips pressed into a wobbling line, and rather than answer verbally, began to cry again. Behind her, Takehiro swore softly, and turned away to give a semblance of privacy. Karin could
not. She had instinctively reached out to comfort the child, and yet in doing so, had caused the field marshal to glance over at her. For a moment their eyes met, and Karin was stunned to see no anger there - just a regret that seemed to settle in her bones. Karin knew she was forgiven, or perhaps had never needed to be - the moment, while slight, carried with it the same profundity that had marked many of their previous interactions. In that moment she knew that just as he would accept her criticism about the welfare of his child without thinking badly of her, she knew that he had never hated her at all - even at the docks, when she had felt he must. She broke eye contact and turned to Maka, unable to withstand the power of the moment. Busying herself with wiping the girl’s cheeks, her own cheeks burned as her heart beat out a dizzying rhythm in her chest. It was too much. This sort of attention would be the end of her, and make her want dishonorable, impossible things - as well as making her love for him so, so hard to bear.

“I will take her home with me. And I will see to it that she has no opportunity to be...unloved, as you said. In the long run, she will need training, and that will take her away from any...unpleasant interactions. In the meantime, I will keep my eyes open.” Fujiwara watched his daughter as he spoke, but his words were for Karin. Suddenly feeling quite close to tears herself, Karin swallowed thickly and nodded. Maka, sensing the tension between her father and his subordinate, cried harder.

There was nothing more to be said. Karin turned away as the field marshal took his leave; a dignified figure even with a sobbing child in his arms. As soon as Fujiwara had passed from view, Karin rubbed her forehead, holding back tears of her own.

After a long moment passed and it became obvious that Karin wasn’t about to break down, Takehiro walked over and slung an arm around her shoulders. He leaned in close and spoke in a quiet, comforting tone. “It’s written all over your face, you know. Whenever you look at him. Dense as he is about this sort of thing, he’ll figure it out eventually if you aren’t more careful.”

For once he wasn’t teasing her. In the face of his genuine concern Karin could keep her secret no longer. She simply nodded, biting the inside of her cheek. Now, Takehiro knew all her secrets. She found she could not begrudge him that. “It doesn’t matter. As long as I don’t do anything, it’ll be - it’ll be fine. As soon as the war is over...I’ll stop.”

“...I don’t think it works like that, Red.”

It didn’t. She knew it didn’t work like that. Still, she wasn’t the type of woman who gave up nor one who intentionally courted misery. “I’m going to make it work like that. It’s like you said earlier - I just need to be more ruthless. So I will. I’ll strike him from my heart as if he means nothing, and then it will all be over. Just you watch, Takehiro. This will all end well. You’ll see.”

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-Two weeks later-

Ruthless, Red had said. She needed to be more ruthless. Yet there was a difference between ruthlessness and foolhardiness, and now that they’d been separated in the middle of a life-or-death battle with another of the demon kings, Beelzebub, Takehiro worried that there may not be time
left to teach his friend that all-important difference.

He spun and ducked low under a shadowy claw that rent the air where he had been standing only moments ago. Above him the demon king stretched at least 50 feet high and 20 feet wide, supported by innumerable, shadowy stalks all tipped with claws, looking much like a humongous spider with a human’s head and torso. The monster bellowed, spewing forth colorless, deadly flame that caused the air around the plume to ripple. Takehiro had lost sight of his friends almost as soon as they had joined the creature in battle, and had no idea whether it was a good sign or a bad one. Their plan had been similar to when they faced Belphegor, with Red and himself acting as twin pincers to distract the monster, while Kouji attacked from behind. Yet this demon was far more powerful, and with a dangerous twist - as they had been warned during their briefing last night by special intelligence coming from the king himself, it targeted the special ability itself, rather than the power user.

“Takehiro!”

Distracted by his frantic planning, he was cuffed upside the head by an unseen claw, and nearly tumbled into a jet of flame - emerging from gaping holes within the demon’s towering midsection - that would have burned the flesh from his bones in seconds. As it was, he was saved at the last moment by Red, who barrelled into him from the opposite direction, shoving them both past the fire’s reach. She rolled off him immediately, wiping her face and neck clean of her own blood with a quick gesture. She let the liquid solidify, molding it into the shape of a long, curved dagger. “You ok?”

Partially stunned from the impact, Takehiro could only grunt. Red was still covered in blood, and the worst part of it was that he couldn’t tell whether it was all her own. Yet the demons did not bleed, so it could only be his, hers, or Kouji’s... Ruthlessness, indeed. If she carried on at this rate, she’d get herself killed. “I’m fine. Where’s Kouji?”

With her other hand she used the wind to whip a fallen tree at the monster, much like an athlete would throw a javelin. She smiled grimly when it hit and the demon tottered, scuttling backwards to keep its balance. “On the other side. His katana melted - think we need a change of plan.”

Shit. Kouji’s weapon was the best crafted of them all, and if it hadn’t stood up to the demon’s flame, what could? Then again, the branch had hit the monster without bursting into flame beforehand...if they could avoid the jets of hyper concentrated fire, could they get a clean hit on the creature? And without a special ability, could they possibly bring the demon king down?

“Can aerial wall withstand the fire?”

“Mine can’t. Kouji’s...maybe?”

“We may need to test it. New plan - you and Kouji distract, I’ll strike. When I get close, have him cover me with it. Meanwhile, avoid the jets.”

There was no time to argue. Karin nodded firmly before racing off towards her cousin, slashing through several of the demon’s limbs as she went. Like spokes in a wheel, the demon was supported by the dark, half-corporeal claws; yet unlike the spider it resembled, there was no limit on the number of legs. Takehiro dragged in a breath, fighting past the scorched feeling in his lungs. He would have only one chance at this, before the demon realized he had no special power to burn. Once that happened, Beelzebub would direct all its physical attacks in his direction, and that would be the end of him.

Takehiro lunged under and over the limbs, steadily making his way to the heart of the demon. Yet
the demon sensed his approach and he had to leap backwards to avoid being impaled on several of the demon’s limbs. It was a very close call - one of the legs ripped a path down his jacket front, weakening the material and drawing a thin line of blood in its wake. What the hell were Kouji and Red doing? Their distraction clearly wasn’t working! Takehiro spat out blood and swore before the an indicative crackling caught his attention. Dodging the flame that spewed from one of the holes in Beelzebub’s flesh, Takehiro’s attention was then drawn to the forest, the source of the noise that had earlier caught his attention.

It was aflame. Smoke rose from the trees in dark, thick clouds; a contrast to the flickering, red-orange wall only 500 feet away from them. Takehiro’s heart stopped in his chest. They were barely one mile away from the camp, who were busily engaged in fighting off the last of the demon’s forces. At the rate the fire was spreading, they would be overtaken in mere minutes. With no hope of putting out the flames, all would die, burned to a crisp along with the demons they fought.

Despair swamped him, and struck him momentarily immobile. No matter how the Shadow unit fared, the rest of the army was doomed! Yet then he noticed - at the edges of his vision, there were trees that inexplicably had not surrendered to the flame. And then, one at a time, the burning trees next to them fell to the ground as ash, destroyed, but unable to pass along their deadly flower. This pattern continued, until only half the treeline was on fire, although Takehiro couldn’t see how far into the forest the reprieve extended. He tore his eyes from the sight and slashed at approaching limbs, yet the reason why came to him in a flash - Kouji’s aerial wall. He must be using it to restrict the flow of oxygen to the flame, limiting its effectiveness and potentially stopping or slowing its spread, so that the army would notice it and survive. It was also why Takehiro had been so easily apprehended, as only Red was acting to distract the demon. Red, who was currently pursuing ruthlessness with very little attention to her own health and safety.

Takehiro had to act quickly. He launched himself at the at demon, avoiding the limbs as they came at him singly, slashing at those that veered too close. As before, when he got too close to the demon’s torso, multiple limbs converged, blocking his progress forward. Forward, but not up - this time prepared, Takehiro vaulted atop the limbs, ignoring how the soles of his shoes slowly burned away as he raced along them to the center of the demon.

His plan was well underway, but now that he was ascending the demon the possibility of failure dogged his steps. His chest heaved as he struggled to take in shallow breaths - the air tasted burnt, and he wondered if the oxygen itself had been rendered less potent. The result was a leaden body that moved at only half his top speed, and even less that in terms of agility. It was only luck that none of the flailing shadow limbs had pierced him, or knocked him from his treacherous bridge. Yet even as he thought that, the limb he was running along shifted upwards, launching him towards the main body of the demon, directly into a jet of flame-

There was only one chance. Takehiro swung his blade wildly to the left, where it caught on one of the monster’s talons, allowing his body weight and the force of his swing to propel him scant inches to the right, just out of the flame geyser’s reach. He slammed up against another of the limbs, and even as his burning hands scrambled for purchase, he watched as his katana was flung into the deadly, colorless flame, and disintegrated. Yet there was no time to mourn its loss - he slid down the limb, clothes providing scant protection from the natural heat of the demon’s flesh. Luckily, he was now at the junction of the limb and the trunk of the demon, and not easily to be thrown aside. Yet how to ascend the demon, and how to destroy it once he got to the head? His dagger had been lost earlier in the battle, when Beelzebub had taken them by surprise. Unless he thought of a plan quickly, he was doomed - for even though the demon had a harder time sensing him than he did his two power user companions, he was still a sitting duck.

Beelzebub screamed, an unholy, sky-splitting roar that seemed to shake the particles in the air
itself. Instinctively, Takehiro clutched at the demon’s trunk, burning his hands that sank nearly an inch into the demon’s flesh. Inspiration struck as the scream died away - he ripped off his coat, tearing it in two, and wrapped it around his hands. His shoes would just have to hold a little longer. Thus protected, he climbed up arduously, forcing his hands and feet into the demon’s giving flesh.

Takehiro had never known such a hellish experience. Sensation was forcibly burned away, leaving his hands and feet at once numb and awash with terrible pain. Even though it was the element under the control of his allies, the air choked him, burning a path down to the embers in his lungs. And even more than before, his body felt sluggish and weak, and the fear of dropping to his death was ever present. Still, he forced his way, hand over hand until he had reached the crest of the demon’s shoulder.

Gasping, he rolled himself over onto the makeshift ledge. Here, the heat was even worse, and the air broiled on his skin. His hair was beginning to sizzle ominously, and the raised patches of burned skin at his feet made it painful to move forward. Attempting to rise, Takehiro swayed dizzyly, nearly pitching off the demon. His thoughts were nearly as sluggish as his body, and he was forced to crawl on his hands and knees to the demon’s face. He had finally gotten close enough - but how would he kill it? For the first time in his life he found himself wishing he had a special power of his own - any would do - so that he would not be currently facing down a demon with only his bare, burned hands.

And then, like a direct answer from the heavens, Karin’s bowie knife floated in front of his face. For a moment he simply stared at it, too amazed by its sudden appearance to move. What would be next, the gods themselves descending from the heavens? Yet then his mind caught up with the situation and he grabbed it, glancing down to where his friend stood stock still, fighting past her own exhaustion and injury to raise her weapon up to him. How had she known he needed it? Had she seen his desperate throw, and the destruction of his own weapon? Takehiro did not know, but just as he was about to turn away and attack the demon, he saw a dark whip strike her viciously, lifting her off her feet like a ragdoll and flinging her out of his vision.

The world around him suddenly focused; a sudden clarity that overpowered his damaged body. Enough. Karin’s sacrifice burned along his veins even hotter than the demon’s fire, and with one final rally of his spirits he charged, sparks erupting under his heels as he dashed forward. Knowing that there was nothing left to lose he screamed out his battle cry, and the demon’s head twisted around, but too late - Takehiro plunged the knife directly into the demon’s neck, using his weight to drive the hit home. This close to Beelzebub’s mouth the air burned his skin on contact, yet in his desperation to strike a mortal blow, he used his momentum to continue the dagger’s path across the entire throat. It cut deeply into the demon’s weak skin, and with such force that the demon’s head flapped back. Takehiro stumbled onto the demon king’s opposite shoulder, reeling in pain and the shock at his accomplishment. Not only had he struck a deathblow, he had nearly beheaded the monster. With what passed for vocal chords slashed, Beelzebub could not even give a death rattle as it sank down, limbs disintegrating one by one. The demon collapsed, defeated.

The world swam before Takehiro’s eyes as he pitched forward, unable to keep his balance on the dying demon king. He knew that with Kouji intent on stopping the wildfire, there was no one left to catch him as he fell. Fighting to keep conscious, he hurtled towards the ground, falling alongside Beelzebub. There was no sense of fear as he fell, nor even a sense of victory - just the taste of blood in his mouth and the oddity of watching the ground swiftly rushing up to meet him. He had time for only one fleeting thought before his vision blackened, mercifully before he landed - the irony of a rare kind ending the war for the power users.
I apologize for the long wait - I just moved halfway across the country, and in my first
day in my new home, I give to you the long awaited ending of the war…and the
beginning of the end for the kingdom, and most of my original characters.
The victory celebrations continued for three days straight. Beelzebub, one of the mightiest demons of hell had been overthrown, and with him the land forces of the demon army. To the east, the King’s Elite Corps - lead by Heike Masaomi, after the Commander had died in battle - had defeated a sea dragon, and word from the king himself was that the Demon War was finally over. A new era of prosperity was sure to be ushered in, and all rejoiced in the promise of peace.

All but Shihoin Kouji, acclaimed slayer of a dragon, countless demons, and two demon kings. Lauded as the greatest hero the kingdom had ever known, it mystified the army that he refused to take part in the revelries with them, and that when asked about the story of his most recent conquest, he had exploded in rage. He was left alone after that; choosing to spend all his time in the field marshal’s tent, where the inert forms of his two comrades rested, hanging in the balance between life and death.

Even though there was nothing he could have done, Kouji’s remembrances of their battle against Beelzebub filled him with regret. Early on it was apparent that his little cousin had developed a death wish, and that she hadn’t died within the first ten minutes was only by the grace of the gods. Thankfully she had calmed, yet there had been no time to appreciate her cool-headed battle tactics - the forest had been set on fire and he knew that neither Karin nor Takehiro could do anything about it. He’d had to retreat from battle entirely so that he could focus the entirety of his attention on forming an aerial wall around the burning trees, strategically cutting off paths so that the fire might burn itself out, rather than continue to spread through to the army. Luckily, he had been successful in slowing the spread of the blaze, and the army, having handily defeated the lesser demons, was able to escape.

Yet he had burned through his power at an alarming rate, and he felt his lost formcoming upon him. He released the aerial wall just in time to see Beelzebub topple, and the smaller form dislodged from its shoulder streaking down to the earth. With the last of his power, he cushioned Takehiro’s descent so that the fall would not be fatal. Then, as a wolf, he pulled the rare kind’s body over to his cousin’s, and at that point it was difficult to determine which comrade was in worse condition.

Takehiro’s entire body had been badly burned, and he wheezed as he breathed, as if even his lungs were burnt. Karin, on the other hand, was barely breathing at all. Kouji was struck by the blood that seeped thickly from her wounds - thanks to her ability, she tended to bleed quite slowly, and had long ago learned to retain her blood through her secondary ability. Both of them were at death’s door, and he had howled until his throat was sore, hoping to call for help but too afraid to
leave either of them. As he waited for the messengers and the healers to arrive, Kouji had discovered there was something worse than losing - being powerless. In his lost form he could hunt down a bear, or a man, or perhaps even a lesser demon, yet he couldn’t help either of his friends.

They had survived, but just. The healers had used their powers on Karin, although they had been tactfully barred from seeing to Takehiro. Instead, Hideyoshi and Kouji tended to him personally, immersing him in cooling baths with herbs, slathering him in ointments, and healing him in the natural way. All their efforts were for naught, however, when Takehiro went into his lost form only a day later, and after Hideyoshi half drowned him in serum, he sprang back to his normal size, skin perfectly healed. Save for his steadfast refusal to wake, he seemed to be out of the woods.

Kouji was not nearly as sanguine for Karin’s recuperation. Her rest was punctuated with brief periods of consciousness where she hadn’t recognized anyone save him, and spoke only in her native tongue. The healers spoke of brain damage, and that he would have to prepare himself for the worst. Kouji lost his temper again, and would have forcibly expelled them from the tent had Hideyoshi, with a strained tone, commanded him not to. Since then, the only hopeful sign for his cousin’s recovery was that her cuts had healed miraculously quickly, showing that she had at least regained her hold on her secondary ability.

Three days into his vigil, Hideyoshi approached him with a packet of documents for the king. The two men stood together watching their unconscious charges before the field marshal handed Kouji the papers. “Here. You should acquaint yourself with the documents within - especially the account of the three of you facing Beelzebub. I’ve made it as obscure as I can, making Karin and yourself to be the true heroes. It’s a flimsy cover story, but it should hold. Yet even with this to protect Takehiro, too many people know his name. He’ll have to leave Takama ga hara with you as soon as possible.”

Kouji dragged his gaze from the rare kind, flicking his eyes over to the field marshal. Hideyoshi’s arm had been badly broken, and would take weeks - even with the healer’s efforts - to heal. Still, the man stood tall, unflinching under the emotional weight of the men he’d lost in the final battle. “How do you know I’m leaving the kingdom?”

“Don’t be a fool. The queen is in love with you, and by all accounts her behavior becomes more erratic with each passing day. There is no question what you will do in light of this - my only question is whether you will be taking Takehiro and Karin with you.”

He should have protested, attempting to hide Hikari’s shameful secret, but Kouji was both mentally and physically exhausted, and had grown to trust Hideyoshi. He was also Kouji’s only true political ally, as Kyo played his own games with ends Kouji didn’t care to fathom. “It depends on what Takehiro says. I’ve asked him, but he was clearly reluctant.”

“That he and Karin needed to leave Takama ga hara hadn’t been in question before, but Kouji wasn’t going to tell him that. By this point, Karin’s secondary ability was the only secret Hideyoshi hadn’t uncovered, and Kouji meant to keep it that way. The thought of Karin permanently damaged - let alone dying - was still too raw to probe. He merely nodded, tracing his fingers over the ridges in the
“I need to get back to my duties. Read over the documents - memorize them, if you must. And...alert me if there are any changes.” He nodded at Karin and Takehiro, grimacing. Kouji nodded dully, but the quiet patter of feet on the stones outside the tent distracted them both. They both turned to address whomever decided it prudent to interrupt the field marshal in his private tent...only to goggle down at a small girl.

“Maka!” Hideyoshi strode forward, prepared to scoop up the young girl that Kouji realized must be his daughter. “Maka, you can’t keep coming out like this, you must stay in the house, it is still dangerous!”

Moving deftly enough to surprise both the men, Maka sidestepped her father and ran to Karin, where she gazed down at her fretfully. Her eyes closed, and Kouji suspected that tears were imminent. Takehiro had mentioned that Karin had made an impression on Hideyoshi’s youngest daughter, but he hadn’t imagined it was enough for the girl - she couldn’t be any more than five or six, and small for her age - to come running down to the camp!

Yet he stood corrected. Her eyes slowly opened and they connected with her father’s, stranded on the other side of the bed. His hands flexed helplessly, and Kouji wondered at the odd dynamic between father and daughter. Why did he not simply retrieve her?

“She’s stuck. There are too many knots. We have to untie them.” The little girl glanced back down at Karin, and bit her lip.

Kouji frowned. Whatever did that odd child mean? And how could she tell? While her words made no sense to him, they appeared resonate with her father. “Maka, wait - no!”

Yet Maka had clambered up onto the bed with Karin, pressing her body against the curve of his cousin’s larger one. Tucking one small hand into Karin’s, she laid her tiny head on her shoulder, closed her eyes, and sucked in a deep breath. This finally jolted her father into awareness, yet by the time he had reached her, Maka was insensate, and no amount of shouting or cajoling could rouse her.

Hideyoshi sank to his knees next to the bed, fingers resting on his daughter’s shoulder. Struck by the strangeness of the moment - and filled with an unexpected hope, if he was honest with himself - Kouji remained silent. Clearly the young girl was doing something, and there was very little chance of her making things worse. Finally, the field marshal turned to him, smiling painfully as he glanced over at the packet. “There must be a change of plans. I know that you will not appreciate this, but I must ask you to deliver the documents to the king.”

_That_ awakened him from his stupor. “But if Karin wakes up and doesn’t remember anyone...can’t speak Japanese-”

He gestured to the bed with the two unconscious girls. “My daughter is delving into her dreams in an effort to save her. Maka is five, and has received no formal training - if she is unsuccessful, I am as likely to lose her as you are to lose Karin. I cannot leave them now. Nor can I trust the documents to anyone else. I’m sorry Kouji. There is no other way.”

Kouji opened his mouth to protest further, but snapped it close before he could. He saw the justice of his friend’s words, but leaving his cousin and friend behind when they were this ill was asking too much of him. He wasn’t calm enough to temper his anger, so he simply nodded, took up the packet, and walked out of the tent.
He would travel in the morning, return immediately, and gods help whomever stood in his way.

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-Three days later-

The mood en route to the palace was every bit as jubilant as it had been among the army, and although Kouji couldn't join in, he could at least smile wanly. His temper had cooled since leaving behind his injured comrades, and he could now appreciate the urge to celebrate - the demons had been plaguing Takama ga hara for years, and now the people were free. Truthfully, he did not begrudge them *that* - it was their hero worship that he could not stand.

Unlike before, he wasn't upset because he hadn't actually killed the demon, it was more a feeling of total disorientation. His plans for the future had just become derailed. If Karin did not survive, he would not only mourn the loss of a cousin and comrade, but part of his reason to start the school overseas. If Takehiro did not awake, or choose to come with him, he would be setting off alone...if he even *could*. To make matter more complicated, no matter how convincing Hideyoshi’s cover story was - and Kouji had to admit it was well written and believable, as expected of a man of words - the common people would always believe that *he* had killed Beelzebub, just as he had Belphegor. That their lauded hero would want to leave the kingdom just as it entered into an era of peace would never be believed, and nor would the king allow it. He was trapped not only by circumstance, but by his talents as well.

If only Hikari could have acted more rationally! He no longer begrudged her feelings for him, as he knew through his interactions with the field marshal that there was no helping love. But *handling* it was another matter, and due to her weakness, he was trapped in a situation that would only hurt them both! Yet perhaps he could rely on her to act for Karin’s good, at least. He could use her illness as an excuse to leave, and would clearly have to escort her to her homeland. Once there, depending on how much Karin recovered (and if Takehiro could be convinced to come with him) he would then either be diplomatic or forceful, but he would not return home. Exile was no longer only an abstract concept, or his uncle’s choice - it had become an unfortunate necessity.

...  

Stagnation was never Kouji’s friend, and so even with the danger attached, he looked forward to the briefing with King Matsuhiro upon his arrival. He was announced with all the fanfare of a returning hero, and his insides churned with disgust. They should be cheering for Takehiro, if no one else...but had they known of his status as a rare kind, they would seek to kill him instead. Kouji had reflected on how unfair Takehiro’s situation was before, but now he was struck by the full measure of its injustice. And his comrade had gone his entire life dealing with such prejudice? It could not continue. He *had* to convince his comrade to depart with him!

His thoughts on the necessity of change distracted him all the way to the king’s chambers, and it was only when he stood outside the doors that he realized the oddity of briefing in such a private area. Shouldn’t the initial greeting be a publicized affair? Matsuhiro was a showman, who knew the value of public appearance. That he had arranged for their meeting to be in a private location did not bode well, either for himself or for Kouji...

Yet to fear prematurely lessened your odds of victory. Kouji swallowed down his fears, breathing deeply to clear his mind. Then, when he felt ready to face anything the king may throw at him, he
opened the doors, striving to feel as confident as he could.

The King of All Earth did not look up at him as he walked in. He sat behind his desk, his head in his hands, and curtly dismissed those who had lead Kouji to him. Only when the two men were alone did he lean back in his chair and address him. “Welcome back, hero. Speaking as both your king and as a man, I am most sincerely proud of your achievements.”

The king’s tired yet genuine expression made guilt churn in his gut, precisely as it had when he’d been given credit for slaying the earth dragon. Kouji smiled awkwardly before ducking his head down, hoping that his reputation towards modesty would distract the king from what he believed was obvious guilt. “Thank you, my lord.” Belatedly, he remembered Hideyoshi’s report and handed the packet across the desk. “Here is a more accurate report of the battle and its aftermath. Hideyoshi sends his best, and his regrets that he could not deliver it in person - his daughter has...fallen ill, and he cannot leave her side until she has recovered.”

The king frowned as he flipped through the pages, lingering here and there. “And the foreigner? It says here that the injuries she sustained were quite serious..”

Kouji kept his eyes firmly on a knot in the wood of the desk, clenching his teeth and swallowing. “She had not regained consciousness when I left. The healers were not very optimistic about her chances.”

“Gods forgive us. Hikari will not be pleased to hear this.”

Kouji kept his face impassive as his dark eyes tracked over the king’s face. Judging by the clouded brow and grim visage, the news had hit his ruler hard. Matsuhiro’s concern was not for Karin’s well being, of course, but for the pain it would cause Hikari when she learned of her half-sister’s state. Considering the terrible scene Takehiro had witnessed, Kouji suspected that matters were still strained between the nation’s monarchs.

Yet he had not expected to see the king this unkempt. Perhaps the king himself was ill, to look so pale and grave. “My lord. I will deliver the message personally, if you prefer. There is hope yet for Karin, and I will paint the message as optimistically as I can.”

“Of course. It is best to keep such things within the family. Even were that not so, I imagine she’d still take the news best from you.”

The air froze in his lungs, and it took all his discipline not to choke. There had been nothing overt to signal that the king knew of Hikari’s affections for him, but the fear was there nonetheless. His meaning could be taken two ways. Deciding that there was nothing for it, Kouji pressed on bravely. “She wouldn’t take the news well from anyone, my lord. Besides, she may blame me for not protecting her.”

The king sighed heavily, and rubbed his temples with his hand. Finally, he let it drop to the desk in a dramatic gesture. “I shall leave it to your discretion. Hikari is the least of our problems, however. I have decided to confide in you, Kouji, but the news is not good. Yes, the war is won, and the demons have receded. Yet what are demons to the blackened hearts of man?”

Panic shot through his veins, even though he had done no wrong. It was unnerving enough that the king was waxing eloquent, and there was an odd light in his eyes... “My lord?”

“You’ve no doubt heard of the Elite Corp’s great victory against the sea dragon. What you haven’t heard is this: on the eve of battle, Heike Masaomi entered the tent to confer with his superior. What he found there could have cost us the battle - Commander Arata was murdered, apparently by
a slow-acting, hellishly painful poison. Thankfully, Heike was able to convince the men to accept him as Commander and with their combined efforts were able to defeat the dragon. Yet the fact remains: Arata was poisoned, and it was not the work of a demon.”

Kouji’s mind alit with questions and dire possibilities. “Murdered at the warfront...had he any enemies? Or perhaps Heike was looking for an early promotion?” There was another possibility, but it was difficult to consider, impossible to voice. Surely, no one could have wanted to grant the demon army a chance at overcoming their own?

“No enemies, or none that could strike him down at the heart of the Corps. Heike’s ambition was something I considered, but then the events of last night made it far less likely.”

Kouji held the king’s gaze for the first time since entering, confusion overpowering his guilt. His eyes flicked over the weariness lining the king’s face. Coupled with the unexpected level of security he had encountered when entering the palace, and even the secrecy of their current interview, suddenly, he understood. “Someone else has died.”

“One of my senior councillors and friends, Lord Onuma was found dead in his chambers this morning. There was no sign of struggle, and the poison was the same. I personally watched over Heike Masaomi last night - a preliminary to house arrest, where we played chess from dusk until dawn, and I learned nothing about the young man other than that he excels at the game - yet have thus been forced to absolve him of responsibility. I am keeping the murder as quiet as I can, but unless we can determine who is behind the murders and what they are after, we will undoubtedly be faced with more death.”

“I’m sorry, my lord. What would you have me do? I will do whatever I can.” This was not how Kouji had wanted this conversation to go. He was supposed to have presented his case for leaving Takama ga hara, using Karin’s illness as an excuse. Yet he couldn’t say anything now when there was a murderer loose in the palace.

“For now, tend to Hikari, if she will let you. She has holed herself up in her chamber, and her maids tell me she is ill. I have not seen her for nearly two weeks, but if you bring news of the foreigner, perhaps you shall succeed where I have not.”

Images of Hikari’s desperation flooded his mind, and he bore a dark suspicion as to the nature of her illness. Could she had been so far removed from her sanity as to commit acts of violence upon her own person? “Her illness is so severe that she has imposed self-quarantine?”

The king smiled, yet it spoke of nothing but his own unhappiness. “Yes, it is necessary for the deception - ahh, I suppose I should tell you. False congratulations are in order: she claims to be pregnant. As I have not lain with her since shortly after your return, I suspect she will be ‘quarantined’ until the illusion can be continued no further. Yes, from the horror on your face I see you understand. She is not well, Kouji. Her heart, her mind...so often it cannot but affect the body as well.” Matsuhiro glanced down at his desk. “I do not blame you, my boy. None of this is your fault. You never gave her reason to hope, either then or now.”

Kouji could not help his stuttering inhale any more than he could the rapid-fire beat of his heart. The king knew of Hikari’s infatuation with him? And didn’t hold him accountable? He gambled, and prayed that he was right. “Then you understand why I...cannot stay? I will see the kingdom righted - I will see justice done for these murders - but then...my lord, I cannot...” Kouji swallowed, cursing himself for his inability to speak when his heart was in his throat. “I wanted to serve you in every capacity, my lord. I have taken the utmost pride in fighting for you, and for your kingdom. But if my presence worsens my cousin’s madness…”
The sound of the king’s chair being shoved back cut through Kouji’s speech. The king had stood, and began to pace, running his fingers through his hair, dislodging strands from his unravelling knot. Finally he turned to face the wind adept, who had watched him cautiously. “I had wanted things for you, not the least of which to be the premier among Kyo’s advisors. I had thought with your influence, Hikari could be brought around, and Kyo’s right to rule unquestioned. But I see now those dreams were foolish. Just as foolish as the gods damned box…” He trailed off, noting Kouji’s confusion. “Are you a brave man, Kouji?”

“I...I have been told I am.”

The king smiled grimly. “Or is it that you do not feel fear? Your uncle Tokitou didn’t, you know. He was never a warrior...but he held death’s hand for decades without flinching. And what of his daughter? Does she know how to fear?”

He had never been able to determine whether it was caused by her lost form or by a more primal instinct, but Karin was terrified of being alone in the dark. It was why she had sought refuge in his tent when she’d lost her power those months ago, and had developed the technique they both had learned to utilize when out scouting with Takehiro - a tether of wind attached to his belt, unrestrictive yet present enough in case of emergencies. The hesitation as he recalled this was just enough. “A little, my lord.”

The king nodded. “After the murderer is caught, I will let you leave Takama ga hara. You may go wherever you wish, on two conditions: that you take back the box your cousin gave to Hikari...and that you never return.”

“My lord-”

“I do not do this to punish you, Kouji. I am giving you your freedom.”

“But why must I take Hikari’s box? It was the one thing her father left to her!”

The king chose not to answer, shaking his head. “Those are my conditions. Do you accept them?”

Kouji turned away, mind racing. He didn’t have nearly enough information to make the right choice, but in the end, did it matter? He needed to leave, and so did Karin and Takehiro... “May I take Karin? Even if she makes a full recovery? And-” (oh, but if they both survived they would never let him hear the end of this) “-may her fiance accompany us?”

Matsuhiro’s eyebrows rose. “I had not heard she was spoken for. Is he nobleman?”

“Oh, no. Simply someone under the field marshal’s command.”

“Then they have my blessing, if they wish to go with you.”

Kouji sighed. There was nothing else he could do. “Then I accept. With gratitude...and my deepest regrets.”

“Mine as well, my boy. Mine as well.”
Two days after his interview with the king, Kouji received a surprise from a visitor he had not expected. At the knock at the door he opened it carefully, sensing with the wind for any possible threats - the murderer had still not been caught, and the king had hidden the truth of Lord Onuma’s murderer by claiming heart failure - yet when he recognized the figure behind the door he thrust them open quickly. On the doorstep stood Karin, thin and tired, yet smiling and alert.

When she spoke it was in Japanese, and the last of his fears were allayed. “Hello, cousin. It’s good to see you again.”

Wordlessly, Kouji pulled her into a hug. It was a very western gesture, the impulse having been learned during his time with her mother’s people, yet he could not find his words until he pulled back. “You’re all right! And here? You can’t be well enough to travel - you were so badly injured…”

She shrugged, and her smile grew somewhat pained. “I woke up - well, I should say Maka woke me up - only a few hours after you left. I stayed until I was sure that she and Takehiro would be fine, and then I came on ahead of the field - the army. They’ll all be here in a day or so. We all made it, Kouji. We’re all fine.”

“Thank god.” Kouji stepped back into the room, inviting her in. She moved slowly, choosing to sit on the bed rather than stand with him. She reached up to massage her temples, and Kouji suspected that she was suffering from a migraine. Clearly she was not as physically well as she had assured him, but she was alive, and mentally whole. “Karin, this is wonderful news. Both you and Takehiro are well! But why did you push yourself? Why did you not stay back with them until you recovered?”

She looked away and bit the inside of her lip. “There was... well. A message arrived for you, after a long delay. It was urgent enough that I volunteered to deliver it.”

“Urgent enough to risk your recovery-”

She interrupted him in her native language. “The queen and the field marshal’s brother are conspiring. She has promised him her service in exchange for three things - my life, the life of the heir’s son, and that Ky- the king’s heir be unable to take the throne.”

Kouji’s eyes narrowed. “You are certain?”

“They were overheard by our youngest cousin and her comrade.”

“And they wanted to tell me?”

“They felt they could not tell anyone else. Even though they are close to him, they felt that the heir would not care unless his son was threatened.”

Kouji began to pace, and the fire in the hearth began to flicker with his uncontrolled gusts of wind. “Who else knows?”

Karin shifted on the bed, glancing at the door. “The field marshal and our rare friend. The field marshal read the letter aloud, and then destroyed it after I had committed it to memory. As long as the children do not tell anyone else, we are all who know.” She swallowed nervously. “I should tell you that the field marshal believes their report to be true... even though it implicates his brother
as a criminal.”

“Damn.” Kouji walked over to the bed and sat beside his cousin, leaning back until he was staring up at the ceiling. “My news for you is not much better, Karin. Several men have been murdered, and we are at a loss as to how and who... While the first two were noblemen, just this morning one of the palace cooks was killed. The pattern seems random, and I have promised the king that we will not leave until the killer is caught. Well, that and one other thing.”

Karin sputtered in surprise. “Le-leave? What do you mean? Surely we can’t leave now that we know...well, what we know. Who else can save Hi-her if not us?”

Kouji shook his head decisively. “I have the king’s promise, but I gave a promise of my own. We’re all leaving Takama ga hara - you, our rare friend, myself - and we will never return. We will alert the king to the plot, find the killer - and its likely they are connected - pick up Hikari’s box, and then-”

Karin stood and began pacing herself, and once again the fire flickered in the hearth, unable to stand against the wind generated by her distress. “Box? We can’t - no. No, I promised Father. I swore to him that I would deliver it to Hikari!”

Kouji held up his hands in a placating gesture. “I know, I know. And you kept that promise. But I need to keep mine.” He sighed, rubbing his hands together. “The king didn’t tell me why, but he would not budge. And briefly he mentioned...well, nothing definite, but I think he...well, he may be a little afraid of the box. I don’t know, Karin. All I know is that it is our ticket out of here, and that we cannot stay. For your and our rare friend’s sake, if not my own.” He reached out and placed a heavy hand down on her shoulder. “Please, Karin. I need your help.”

“She won’t see you, will she? Is it because you broke her heart?”

She asked so matter of factly that Kouji could not take offense. And at this late hour, he found he could not longer hide the truth. “Yes. I did not mean to, but I did.”

Karin nodded slowly, as she considered their position. Finally, she looked up at him and the set of her shoulders told him all that he needed to know. “And if we do this, Hikari will get better? Ta - our rare friend will be free?”

“We will all be free.”

She sighed, and her fingertips worked again at her temples. “Then I will help you. Even though I feel... I feel as if this will not end well.”

“It will end as well as we can make it. Thank you, cousin. It is the right thing.”

Karin looked down at her hands before finally responding. “I just pray we don’t have cause to regret this...”

Chapter End Notes

Spoiler alert: They do.
I apologize for the lateness - moved, got a new job, and got slammed by some real life. Many thanks to all who reviewed, especially Juicey who kept me writing with her helpful comments :) 

Next chapter is a current chapter, and there's a biggish reveal - hopefully I didn't foreshadow it too obviously before. Let me know what you think!
Realizations

Chapter Summary

In which dreams, dares, and dalliances figure.

Chapter Notes

And the last major romantic pairing is finally revealed. I have a feeling I may be getting a lot of backlash on this particular chapter...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2018

She was young in body, but not in mind. This frustrated Sakura to no end, as her stubby legs wouldn’t move as fast as she’d like them to. She was trapped in the body of a toddler, and even though it was her own, something about it still caused fear to trickle down her spine, one vertebrae at a time.

Yet that could be more accurately attributed to her location, perhaps. The long, white painted hallways were fuzzily recognizable, and after a moment of thought she recalled them with a jolt. Eden. The hospital. As she remembered, her mind cleared. Of course she was in Eden - she was a rare-kind child, this was where she should be. Vaguely, something about this reasoning seemed wrong to her, as if she’d had a life outside of Eden and its confines, yet that feeling quickly passed. It was replaced with a strange, throbbing sensation; a sense of purpose and direction, distinct as a red arrow painted on the gleaming walls. It was, now that she had the presence of mind to think about it, what had frustrated her only moments ago. Yet why should she bemoan the size and strength of her legs? Their current capacity was all she’d ever known, after all…

The pull led her down the hallway and through the subsequent turns - right, left, left... Sakura followed her internal path in a daze, caught between the ebb and flow of her fear as her heart pounded louder and louder in her chest. Whatever she was walking towards would not be a good thing, she knew, but there was no other way to go. Her internal frenzy reached its apex when she rounded one last corner and came face to face with a door - old cherry colored wood, dirt-encrusted hinges, utterly incongruous in the sterile hallways of Eden’s observation facility. Yet such was the nature of her focus that she did not question how out of place the portal was. She simply reached forward with her tiny hands and pressed firmly against the low panelling, too small to reach the doorknob.

The door swung open at her touch. At the center of the room stood a young woman facing away from Sakura, her long hair falling down her back, brushing against the well-worn, leather underbust corset hugging her waist. She was surrounded by three large dolls, and oddly enough, Sakura thought that they looked familiar, even though she could not remember owning any such toys: a girl whose features were hidden by a cat mask, a little boy with wild hair and chopsticks, a
handsome teenager whose left hand was painted blue. The sight of them made Sakura’s eyes sting, and she was utterly bewildered by the water that leaked from her eyes. She squinted, hoping it would stop her eyes from...whatever it was they were doing, yet in doing so noticed something unsettling enough to turn her sorrow to fear - even though they were standing, all the dolls did so on just one leg.

The young woman slowly turned, and oh - Sakura knew who it was! It was Rin, the nice lady who had played with her once! She had never seen her again, but she had not expected to. Rin had told her that she was going away, but that Sakura was strong, and would do the right thing when the time came. She had told her so many other things, but Sakura was younger then, even more so than now, and had forgotten... Still, seeing her now was enough to cause her lips to tremble under the unfamiliar effort of a smile. She reached out for her, stepping closer to the dolls-

-but stopped when she noticed the glowing object Rin held. Even though Sakura did not know what it was, she could feel the power rolling off it in waves, and knew, in the hazy way of dreams, that this was something to be feared. Her eyes flew to Rin’s, yet were arrested by the wide, unnatural smile that seemed to stretch from ear to ear. Rin’s head tilted to the side and Sakura took another step back, eyes falling to the dolls.

“Powered by love.” Rin’s voice was whispery and paper thin, and it was even more frightening than the box she held in her hands. Then, without taking her eyes off of Sakura, she kicked down the first doll, the one with the cat mask. The doll fell to the floor, shattering into thousands of porcelain pieces when it landed.

Sakura swallowed and watched with wide eyes, too afraid to move. Yet why was she afraid? The doctors had made it clear she had no sense of self to fear...

Rin rotated the box within her hands, yet there was no discernible difference to the edge that Sakura could see. “The price of time.” Now her voice was deep and ragged, and it was the doll holding the chopsticks that she kicked. Once again, Sakura watched it tumble to the floor, wincing at the spray of porcelain across her feet.

Her eyes fell to the last doll, the one that when she looked at it, caused her chest to burn. Across from her, Rin rotated the box once more, and without consciously deciding that she would do so, Sakura leapt forward - ignoring the slice of doll shards cutting into her bare feet - and grabbed the doll. She held it close to her chest, and the burn resided. She glared up at Rin, as if daring her to take what she had found.

Rin’s smile widened, and her head tilted further so that her ear rested on her shoulder. “Four to open the door.” It was finally in her true voice, the one that Sakura could but barely remember. Yet then the box in her hands flared bright, and Sakura had to shut her eyes to keep them from burning. Almost simultaneously, the doll in her hands went up in flames - blue flames, she could see even through her shut eyelids - and she was burning, she was dying, she was-

Sakura woke with a gasp, body flooded with adrenaline and panic. It took her several long moments to realize that what she had just experienced was a dream. It was so vivid, so bright - yet it was no memory. She had never seen Rin again after their one meeting, Pandora’s Box hadn’t existed yet, and she’d certainly never had dolls emulating Mishiru, Ai, and Ogami...

Sakura rubbed her temples, willing her heart rate to return to normal. The last time she’d had a nightmare, Yuuki had been woken up by her cries and had waited outside her door, offering to help her back to sleep. After turning down his offer of a lullaby or two - and she hadn’t quite trusted that flirtatious gleam in his eye, she was going to have to watch out for him - she’d gone down to the kitchen for a glass of milk and it had helped her fall back asleep. Suspecting that would be the case
now, Sakura made her way down the hallway, pausing here and there to consider different aspects of her dream. It was metaphorical, certainly. Some things were easy to decipher. In her dream she had been a child, and so she had dreamed of her three friends that had existed then...although she hadn’t known Mishiru at all, then. Obviously, she was trying to work through how they were all connected, as she suspected that was somehow connected to Pandora’s Box.

And had that been the box Rin was holding? Rin’s death had been one of the triggers to the creation of the box, so perhaps that was the connection? Sakura remembered the door, and her mind’s eye reconstructed it so vividly she nearly saw it in actuality. No, something about the door was important. The box, the door, Rin’s cryptic message...and why all the dolls only had one leg. None of it made sense, but hopefully with a glass of milk in hand, she’d be able to think a little more clearly.

She was just about to round the corner into the living room when she hesitated. There was a quiet, clicking noise on the edges of her hearing, and she took a moment to try and place it. Before she could, however, she was interrupted Zed’s voice, coming from the living room and just out of sight.

“You know, no one’s going to stop you if you want to spend more time with her.” Gone was his modern drawl; he was speaking in quiet, measured tones, as gently as he had during his youth. Sakura knew even before his companion responded that the person he was speaking to could only be her mother.

“No one besides myself, you mean?”

“Well, yes. You seem to be the primary problem in this situation.”

This was followed by a quiet thud, and after a moment, little gasps of laughter. Suspecting that they were speaking about her, (and that her mother had just visited physical punishment upon her best friend’s person) she crept carefully forward, hoping that her rare kind blood would keep them from realizing she was eavesdropping. And then she heard it again - that odd little sound, so familiar yet not, like the snick of a music box when opened, or-

“Rako. You don’t have to be afraid. She loves you. She’s never blamed you.” There was something so intimate in his using that nickname now that they were adults, and it made Sakura’s heart pound in her chest. Belatedly, she wondered why they were sitting in the living room alone this early in the morning. On the heels of that thought, she wondered if she shouldn’t simply walk away, and leave this mystery unsolved.

Yet then she heard the noise a third time, and she very nearly placed it. For some reason, it brought to mind her college roommate, and those horrible romantic comedies she watched. But now her mother was speaking again, and she paused, only one step away from peeking in and seeing them. “I know, I know. It’s just that...everyone else met her when she didn’t remember. Takehiro, Kyo... even you had time with her before. It’s hard to face her. I just-

“It’s hard to face her because you always remembered. And you still blame yourself, even though you know there was nothing else that you could have done.”

Sakura inched forward, focusing on hiding her presence like her aikido master had taught her. She crouched down slowly so that her knees wouldn’t crack, and so she could poke her head around without attracting immediate attention. No one expected a head around the corner at waist level, after all.

Her mother sighed. “Partially. Oh, ok, a little more than partially. How could I feel any different? But there’s more to it than that, and it’s not very rational. A part of me is jealous of everyone who
met her six years ago - Inoichi got to protect her, Takehiro spent *months* adventuring with her…and all I got to do was slice her in half with my katana.” She laughed quietly. “I’m even a little jealous of you. And *not* because you kept trying to feel her up.”

Zed laughed, and Sakura scowled. Why would her mother say something like that so fondly? Didn’t she care that her best friend was a serial lecher? “So I didn’t break my cover, then? I centered on Rui as quickly as I could, but Masaomi gave me a few calculating looks nonetheless. It was a little odd, though. She looks so much like you…and feels exactly like him.”

“The two people you love the most,” her mother whispered, and it was what made Sakura - who had been hesitant to take that final step, some hidden instinct*kept* holding her back - finally glance around the corner and look.

What she saw made her drag in a quiet breath and hold it. They were kissing. Slow, deep, open-mouthed kisses that were equal parts passion, comfort, and some bone-deep emotion that made Sakura’s throat clench. *This* was what she had heard, and her sleep-fogged mind unable to recognize. And this was why they were sitting in the living room at three in the morning, so that they wouldn’t be easily discovered.

Sakura backed away slowly, making even more effort to be silent than when she had approached. When she reached the staircase she turned, and knowing that she would be unable to sleep with the images of Zed and her mother entwined on the couch, kept walking until she reached the door leading to the backyard. After taking several long minutes to ensure that the door opened as quietly as possible, she stepped through on the back patio.

She stood there for some time, breathing deeply and trying to think of anything other than what she had just witnessed. It was then that she smelled it: tobacco, potent enough on the evening breeze to make her nose wrinkle. No doubt Toki, she thought in a daze, still unable to process anything more complex than *escape* and *guilt* and *does Father know?* Distantly, she was disappointed in Toki. He had given up his habit years ago, and while she understood it was a difficult addiction to break, smoking was terrible for his lungs. Deciding she might feel just a bit better after telling him so, Sakura walked around the back of the mansion, where she could see the jut of his forearm, and the cigarette held at the junction of his palm and fingers. She prepared her best *I mean business* face (*the one she’d inherited from her mother, who was currently kissing Zed on the couch like she’d never needed anything more than his lips, his mouth, his love*—oh, God help her) and rounded the corner with a reprimand on her lips. “You know, smoking is terri-”

She did a double take when she saw who was actually holding the cigarette. “Father?”

Her father smiled sheepishly, blowing out a thin puff of smoke before glancing over at Toki, who had turned away in an attempt to hide his laughter. Shibuya eyed his shaking shoulders with a distinctly unamused expression before jabbing him with the lit end of the cigarette. Toki yelped before turning around, muttering as he yanked the cigarette out of Shibuya’s grip. “You shitty cat. See if I spot you another fag ever again.”

Her father ignored him. “You’re up late, sweetheart. Couldn’t sleep?”

Perhaps she was still dreaming. It was the only way these odd pairings would make sense. Her father, smoking? With Toki? That was even less understandable than her mother and Zed. At least they’d always been *friends.* “Father? You smoke?”

He shrugged. “Not really.”

Sakura’s eyes tracked between Toki and Shibuya, as if she were unsure which one was the more
appropriate to address her question. Toki snickered around a long drag, and it made up her mind. She turned back to her father. “Then, um. Why are you? Now, I mean. Also why with Toki?”

“Hey! I am an excellent smoking companion. The best, if I may say so myself. Largely as I provide the smokes.”

Father and daughter ignored him again, and engaged in a long, charged look that bordered on a staring contest. Finally, he relented. “Sometimes you just need something, Sakura. This is just one of those nights. And smoking is...well. The only vice available to me at the moment.”

She thought of Zed and Sakurako in the living room, and closed her eyes. “Father, I...I understand what you tried to tell me, now. About Mother, and her connection with Zed... and moving on.” She took a deep breath as she struggled to bring her jumbled thoughts in some semblance of order, and missed the nervous glance shared by her companions. “And I want you to know that I am here for you. Mother too. I don’t blame or judge either of you. I just love you both.” As if this was enough to structure the chaos inside of her, she nodded firmly. “Yes. That is exactly what I meant to say.”

The two men exchanged another glance, yet it was to gauge whether the other knew what she was talking about. Sakura misunderstood, and scowled. Perhaps she was not at her best, but she found herself perfectly coherent!

Finally, Toki rubbed the back of his neck and handed the cigarette to his mentor for one last puff. “So...does this mean we don’t have to keep Sakurako and Zed’s thing a secret anymore?” He was looking down as he said it so he saw the cigarette as it tumbled from Shibuya’s fingers, first. Then he glanced up and saw firsthand his teacher’s surprise. “What? Oh, c’mon, Shibs. It was obvious! And maybe Yuuki and I walked in on them once, a couple years ago.” He chuckled nervously. “Man, I’ve never seen Yuuki move that fast. I’ve never moved that fast. Shit, that was terrifying.”

Shibuya sputtered, but Sakura merely nodded. “Yes. They are somewhat overwhelming. I feel better now, knowing that I’m not the only one that feels that way.” Then she turned back to her father, taking his arm. “Are you all right with them, Father?”

He looked down into her wide, earnest eyes, and groaned. “Sakura. One day, you will have children as painfully forward as yourself, and you will know exactly what I am feeling right now. But yes. Yeah, I’m fine with it, and I have been for a long time. I learned a long time ago that it’s better to have a future than a past, darling. This is just one of those things. Some loves aren’t meant to last forever, or at least forever unchanged. Otherwise...” He sighed and glanced back towards the house, honing in on a window on the third floor. “Otherwise you end up in love with something that no longer exists...and that can be dangerous.”

“Dangerous? I don’t understand.” Sakura reflected for a moment. “You mean in terms of your heart? I know heartbreak, Father. If that’s what you mean-”

Shibuya winced and glanced over at Toki, as if he might understand what he meant, and know a better way of putting it. “Not just that. That’s bad enough, of course, but people can go a little crazy with love. Like Karin, when Hideyoshi...well. Like Karin. Or even Maka. Or-”

“Or like my old man.” Toki interrupted him as he shook another cigarette loose from the box. “Although maybe he’s not the best example. He was in love with ideals, and look where it got us.”

Sakura shook her head. “That’s different. That’s not romantic love.”

For a moment, neither man spoke. Toki took a long drag and exhaled smoke. “You know, I spent a full week trying to figure out why Karin looked so damn familiar to me. It finally hit me after the
blood training - Dad had a painting of her in the attic. He must have done it from memory, as I’m pretty sure she’d never have sat for him, but...well. I’m not exactly sure what it means, as the thought of my father loving anyone is kind of hard to fathom, but I can understand him wanting her for other reasons. Her power, her position...maybe even his brother’s connection with her. I don’t know. All I know is that I’m his only biological child, and I’m a half caucasian. Judging by all the downsides of having a half-blooded son in Japan at the time...why else would he do it if he wasn’t still hung up on her? He never loved my mother, I know that much, nor was she a strong power user. So why was I even born? Chance? Bad luck? Some twisted form of love that not even he really understood?” Toki flicked the ash from the butt of the cigarette before offering it to Shibuya, who waved him off with a bemused expression on his face. “I guess what I’ve realized is that not only does loving something like that make you crazy, but it also makes you stupid. And even when you figure out that much, there’s nothing you can do about it because you’re in love, and who doesn’t want to be in love? But if you can’t be honest to yourself, you can’t face the goddamn problem, and then you’ll never get it over it. That’s what your mom and your dad learned how to do: get over it. Think about how much better the world would have been if someone had taught that to my dad...or Bentou, or Rei, or you. Or me. All of us were in love with something. And that was what kept us from figuring out what the most important thing was...and then doing it.”

Shibuya sighed. “For a moment there, I thought you had something. Then you lost me.”

“Stuff it, old man. That was practically divine inspiration, and...”

“Powered by love,” Sakura whispered to herself, completely ignoring her companions. “The price of time. Four to open the door.” She looked up at Toki, and her eyes sparkled with excitement. “I get it. I get it! I think I know what we have to do to close Pandora’s Box!” Turning to her father, she took his hands in her own. “Father, we need to contact Ai and Mishiru. I’m pretty sure that we’ll need them. Will either of them be helping us fight the dragon or the demons?”

“Not...that we’d planned...”

“You’re right...maybe after we defeat our enemies is better...” Sakura trailed off, fidgeting absentmindedly in her excitement. “Still, I think we’ll need them here. Yes, I’m fairly sure.”

Shibuya bent down so that he could look his daughter in the eye. “Sakura, darling. What are you talking about?”

Sakura beamed happily before kissing her father on the cheek. “Not now, Father. I have to think it over. I’ll let you know in the morning, ok?” She was so excited that she kissed him again, and Toki coughed in an attempt to hide his laughter.

“Yes, yes, goodnight to you too, Toki. I’ll see you both in the morning!” Sakura ran off before either could protest. The two men looked at each other, bewildered.

“What was that all about?”

Toki shrugged and then laughed. “I told you it was divine inspiration...”
The morning dawned splendidly, as if in defiance of all the upheaval of the night before. After a long, awkward breakfast where half the people at the table now knew far more than they’d like about the other half, it was decided that they would send a scout to Takama ga hara. Yuuki was the natural selection, and after being briefed, was shown the door. All might have continued on in the status quo had he not decided to break the morning calm.

Yuuki blinked sleepily as he surveyed those who had turned out to watch him. He would travel by helicopter in order to reach Takama ga hara by noon, finally making good use of the pilot’s license he’d had since he was 14. Otherwise he’d be far too exhausted to survey the whole of the island - including the long-abandoned home of the rare kinds. He was the only Code:Breaker entrusted with this information, after a long debate between Nisemaru’s prudence and their need. Even Kouji didn’t know how to get there, and it made Yuuki puff up a little with pride.

Yet Kouji wasn’t there to send him off, which made him a little sad. He liked the wolf man, even though he was playing games with Ruirui’s heart. Neither was she there to see him off, as she’d gone into her lost form during a midnight sparring session with Mystery Ladymaru #2. His faux older brother was sleeping in, and DedZed and Sakurako were training, although he was about 70% sure that everyone in the house now knew that was simply a polite euphemism for sex. The only ones that came to send him off were Nyanmaru, Nisemaru, and Sixth. He was glad for them (as he couldn’t enact his plan without them) but wished there could have been one or two more spectators. It would make his plan unfold all the more spectacularly.

He glanced over at Nyanmaru. Still obviously sleepy, rubbing her eyes blearily. It was the first time he’d seen her so tired, and wondered if it was the product of age, or of a late night rendezvous. Either way, it fit into his plans nicely. He made sure that she was the last he’d say goodbye to, first shaking both Sixth’s and Nisemaru’s hands, nodding absently at Nisemaru’s last instructions. Then, just before Sixth began to turn away- ostensibly to avoid Nyanmaru - he made his move.

He cupped the back of Nyanmaru’s head gently, careful not to move too quickly, but fast enough that even her father wouldn’t be able to stop him. He leaned in and kissed her square on the lips, lingering long enough to register their softness, and to be sure that Sixth saw him.

Fourth, had he known of Yuuki’s plan, would have fainted dead away. Nisemaru’s first reaction was to make a noise rather like a screaming tea kettle, before grabbing his daughter, whom Yuuki had thrust at him in order to make his escape. This kept him occupied, but not Sixth. He reached out for him, entire body alight in hell flame, and for once Yuuki was not going to move fast enough. Even Sixth’s eyes were blazing, and there was time only enough to realize he may have miscalculated before Sixth’s hand shoved the door shut, just as Yuuki had opened it.

He tensed, waiting for his inevitable demise.

“Ogami, stop.”

As Yuuki was not shoved through the door in a blazing tangle moments later, Sixth must have followed her orders. Immediately following, the flame blazing at Yuuki’s back flickered out. A cautious glance backwards showed that Nyanmaru had wrested free of her father’s grip and now held Ogami’s hand - raised at shoulder height, indicative of the blow he would land on Yuuki - in both of hers. The anxiety in the pit of Yuuki’s stomach rolled over, leaving him immensely vulnerable. Nyanmaru had never been at their level in terms of fighting prowess, but had always been able to surprise them. She had always been able to bring Sixth back from the brink, as well. His wellbeing depended on her still being able to do both of those things.
“Yuuki has a job to do, Ogami. You need to let him go and do it. Both of you. Don’t think that I don’t see you sneaking off, Father.”

Nisemaru slunk back to her side, muttering in a tone that was quite clear to Yuuki, but not to anyone else. This was for the best, Yuuki considered. Nisemaru’s plans to emasculate, quarter, and then decapitate him were ill thought out at best, and embarrassing at worst. Even Nisemaru wasn’t fast enough to catch him when he really wanted to run. Besides, they needed him to act as lookout for demons.

Nyanmaru continued, never taking her gaze off of Ogami’s. “We have bigger problems. You boys can hash...that out when it’s all over. Let it alone, Ogami.”

Yuuki had half turned back around, wanting to see this charged interaction more than he valued his life and safety. Truthfully, he knew that now that Sixth had temporarily stopped flaming, escape would be easy. First, however, he had to witness the completion of his master plan.

Sixth’s head jerked minutely to the left, and Nyanmaru’s lips thinned. She tightened her grip on his hand, and even though Yuuki knew from experience that her grip could crush iron, Sixth didn’t flinch. He simply held her gaze, and if Yuuki hadn’t known for a fact that they were unable to speak mind to mind, he could have sworn they were doing so.

Finally, after staring at each other long enough to make he and Nisemaru supremely uncomfortable, she let go of his hand. “We gave up the right to care six years ago, Ogami. My...chastity isn’t yours to protect. Neither is my heart.” She sighed. “That being said, Yuuki is very sorry for what he did, because I didn’t want him to do it. When he gets back, he and I are going to have a long talk about consent. But neither Father or you will be involved. Because it’s my decision, and my life, and that is all there is to it.”

She flushed as she spoke, yet she didn’t look away from Sixth. Yuuki swallowed quietly, unable to look away. There was so much between them - passion and longing, trust and insecurity, love and bitterness and resignation. Yet underneath all that, a faint undercurrent that Yuuki doubted anyone else could sense...was hope. Yet whether it was hope that someday they might be together or that someday they would no longer wish to be - he didn’t know. Right now, watching the two of them confess their love through the eyes, he didn’t want to know.

All had gone according to plan. Now it was all up to them.

Chapter End Notes

The good news is that I’ve got 4/5’s of the first one shot done, and it’s going to be a long (and juicy) one - I’m guessing around 18K+ in terms of word count. The bad news is that this is the end of the finished chapters, and the storyline may slow down a bit. Next chapter is past again, and should be the last dialogue driven chapter before all hell breaks loose.
Chapter Summary

In which the end comes slowly yet truth comes quickly, and there are several ways to say farewell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1899

The dawn came far too soon for Karin, and with it came the necessity to face her sister. There was not even time to wait on the king. Hikari would receive word of her arrival at any moment, and by the stubborn bonds of sisterly affection, Karin wanted to present herself as a happy surprise. Deep down, there was still the faint hope that Hikari would be saved, and even if they could not be together, she could be healed. Perhaps in time they could come together again, their bond stronger for their current test. For now, however, she could only focus on her goal. She had to put her friends’ and her own safety first.

Kouji had taken up residence as far away from Hikari as he possibly could, so the walk from his rooms to hers left Karin plenty of time to bolster her resolve with thoughts of those she was protecting. Ultimately, Kouji could and would take care of himself. Indeed, it was difficult for her to imagine her protecting him - outside of their battles against the demons, he had never before needed her help this desperately. He had always taken care of her, both as an older cousin and her trainer. She had come to rely on him completely, so now that he was relying on her, the responsibility sat oddly on her shoulders.

Takehiro was a slightly different story. In terms of power he was her superior, yet they were closer in age, and she had seen him at both his best and his silly, drunken worst. If Kouji was like her trainer/father figure, he was her brother, and it lent itself a little more easily to protecting him wholeheartedly. Besides, she could at least tell herself that if not for her, he’d still be stranded up on Beelzebub’s shoulder.

Her gloom lifted slightly as her thoughts turned to Maka, who even now was resting in the healer’s tents back with the army, Takehiro, and her father. Her last memory of her had been the morning she had left, the girl snuggled up in Takehiro’s arms. Since Maka had awakened, she had been scared to sleep alone. So while her father was busy she made do with Takehiro, and if he had mouthed several choice curses at Karin when she had teased him about what an excellent father he’d make, she would never tell.

Yes, the little girl had definitively wormed her way into her heart...and her head. Maka had rescued her from a fate worse than death - at worst a coma like sleep, at best permanent brain scarring - by carefully unravelling what she called the “knots” in Karin’s mind. The healers had been astounded. Such an action was, as far as anyone could tell, unconnected to her ability over mind reading, and dreams. One of the older healers spoke of the elasticity of children’s powers and the role desperation played in the amplification thereof, but all Karin knew was that Maka had loved her well enough to face her own mind’s destruction to save her. She could do nothing other than love her back just as much, and had she not already pledged her life and allegiance to the girl’s father,
And the field marshal - but she could not think of him. She would not. Thinking of him was simultaneously too much and too little, and now that she had recognized the deep well of sorrow he hid behind his stern exterior, her heart broke in increments every time he looked at her. She had seen much from Maka during their time connected, and then in recuperating. Beautiful and perfect as she seemed, he did not love his wife, yet he loved his family. His poetry was full of sorrow and unrequited love, and while Karin was not foolish enough to hope it was directed towards her, she understood that desperate, hopeless longing, and more than she wished love for herself, she wished peace for him. Yet that was beyond her power to ensure, and so all she could pray for was that when the time to leave Takama ga hara came, she would leave behind her love for him, letting it linger on the shores of this tumultuous island, leaving her head and heart free for whomever else came her way…

Karin was so deep in thought that she almost didn’t recognize the person standing in front of the doors to her sister’s chambers, tense as a soldier on the eve of their first battle. The name came to her when the girl glanced her way. It was her cousin, Sakurakouji Sakurako. The snippet of a girl whose power was over life, itself...and hadn’t seemed to like her much upon their meeting.

Yet she was also the one who had given them warning, and had risked everything to do so. Judging by the way the corners of her mouth pinched, Sakurako was not looking forward to their reunion. Karin exhaled slowly before bowing politely. The girl curtsied in return, and as she rose, Karin whispered on the wind so that it could travel only to the girl’s ear.

“Thank you for your message. Kouji and I are taking countermeasures against the lady in question’s...partner. Are you and your friend well?”

Surprised at this new method of communication, Sakurako blinked wide eyed and shivered. Then, she nodded.

Karin smiled in response as she rose and spoke in a normal tone. “Good evening, little cousin. How is our lady? I had heard she was...in a delicate condition.”

Sakurako glanced to either side before answering frankly. “She’s gone crazy.”

Karin choked on her inhale before also glancing around the empty hallways. “What?! You can’t just-”

The girl shook her head. “It’s true. Everyone knows it. And she doesn’t care if you say it - her other maids said it all the time, and it’s like she didn’t even hear them.” She shrugged. “But she won’t see almost anyone now. Just me, to help her dress. Because I’m family. I’m supposed to be guarding her, but she makes me leave the room when she...well. When she talks to her box.”

Karin gaped. This was far sight worse than faking a pregnancy. No one had told her it was this bad! And if the box Sakurako was referring to was what she was supposed to steal… “I...I need to see her. Will she see me?”

Sakurako nodded before looking up at her thoughtfully. She whispered, “What will you do? About her...and...” She mouthed the name: Fujiwara.

“We will do whatever we must to protect the kingdom. Even if it means going against someone we love.” Karin’s eyes shuttered. She and Kouji had debated alternate plans until early morning, but their current course was the best one. Even if it meant betraying Hikari. Even if it meant leaving everything behind. He would handle Kyo, and the king. All she had to do was get the box from
Hikari, and convince Takehiro to leave with them.

Belatedly, she noticed the girl’s clouded expression. “And when...everything is settled, will you and your friend be safe? Kyo has promised to protect you, hasn’t he?”

Sakurako’s chin shot up and the familiar defiance rose to the fore. “Of course we’ll be-!” She dropped back down to a whisper. “We’ll be fine. We have...plans. Just in case. But we will be fine. Just...take care of...” She trailed off and jerked her chin back towards the door. After a long moment, Karin nodded. There was no time now for sisterly affection to could her thinking. Unlike Kouji, she suspected that Hikari’s madness was not simply the effect of her hopeless love for him, and guilt over whatever deal she had struck with Fujiwara. In her short time with her, she had seen that Hikari was made of sterner stuff than that. The obvious answer was that Hikari was somehow involved with the poisonings as well - if not doing the deed herself, than providing the opportunity to the noble targets. Yet she had been unable to voice her suspicions to Kouji, and he had chosen to believe that her madness was tied to their father’s box, of all things.

It was foolish. What harm could a box do? And this box in particular! It had rested upon a cabinet in her father’s studio for as long as she could remember, with no ill effect upon anyone at all. Yet Sakurako had mentioned Hikari’s fixation with it as well... Perhaps it was not what the box itself was, but what it symbolized to Hikari? If were that the case, then she wasn’t failing her father’s promise by taking it back - she was likely saving her sister’s sanity.

She was also wasting time prevaricating. Her decision was already made. She couldn’t change it now. She nodded once more to Sakurako, and whispered one last thing - thank you. The girl might not like her, but she had very likely saved the kingdom by alerting them of Fujiwara and her sister’s treachery. Then, she laid her hands on the doors leading to her sister’s room, and entered in.

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Karin did not lock the door behind her. There was no point - the room was complete disarray. More clothes, jewelry, and books than she had ever seen in her life lay littered on the floor, bed, and shelves; pots of makeup and herbs spilled across the same surfaces, staining the air with their pungent scent. Even the Western-style curtains had been yanked down from their railings, trailing down crimson like a freshly spilled pool of blood. Karin shivered, and then called out for her sister. “Hikari? Are you here?”

Silence. For the first time since she had arrived at the palace, Karin realized she may have just walked into a trap. Yet to present a defensive guard to her sister may be detrimental to her current mental state. She had to trust for just a little longer. “Sister?”

A sliver former in the wall, that widened when part of the panelling slid aside. Hikari leapt from the secret passageway, hair and clothes partially undone, makeup haphazardly applied on her face. Yet more than that it was her gleeful, unfocused expression on her face that made Karin’s heart pound. There was nothing sane in such an expression, and there were very few sane, logical reason to hide out in a wall.

Hikari moved quickly and threw herself into her arms. “Karin! You’re here! Oh, I waited so long for you! I missed you so much, Sister!” Without letting go Hikari danced around her, jumping up and down in time with the sickening lurch in Karin’s stomach. “Ahh, but I knew you’d stay back with the army...that’s where Field Marshal Fujiwara is, no?” Hikari broke away with a sly smile, glancing back over her shoulder in a perfect imitation of some of the cattier women at court. Recognizing Karin’s shocked expression and taking it for fear, she rushed back over to her sister, clasping her hands. “Oh, Sister, don’t worry. I wouldn’t give away your secret for anything! He is a fine man, although unfortunately saddled with that bitch of a wife.” She tapped her chin
thoughtfully, ignoring her sister’s choked disapproval. “You know, she wanted the other brother, the younger one. Her great secret is that she even tried to seduce him once. Yet with her age she could only get Hideyoshi...such a pity for him.”

“Hikari-”

“I’m sure he’d be much happier with you...oh, if only divorce were legal!”

“Hikari!”

The queen looked up at her, derailed from her twisted line of thought. She cocked her head to the side with a child’s innocence. “Yes?”

Karin took a deep breath and strove to be calm. This was all part of the madness. This wasn’t truly her sister. “No matter how I feel for the field marshal, I don’t want anything to happen. It’s just a little crush, Hikari. Besides, think of what the split would do to his poor children. They need their mother. You know that.” Her voice was low and gentle, and she was careful to say nothing but the truth. For a moment the wild light in Hikari’s eyes dimmed, and she thought she had gotten through to her sister. Yet then she spun around, western dress flaring out at her knees, and stepped close to the bed. Now that she wasn’t so close to her, Karin could see her father’s box clasped tightly in Hikari’s hand.

“Not all children need their mother, Sister. Some would be better off if their mothers were dead.” She glanced back at Karin, and her beautiful features twisted in rage. “Mine was a horror. She made me miserable every day of my life until she died. Raving bitch who could not keep her greed checked - do you know what she would have made me? Do you? If she had not died I would have been whoring myself out to noblemen just to appease her vanity and her ambition!”

Fear stopped Karin cold, like her bones might snap apart if she made the wrong move. “But you won’t be that sort of mother. You could never be.”

Changing moods just as quickly and unexpectedly as she had before, Hikari tilted her head down and glanced coyly through her lashes, like a girl with a secret. Gone was her rage, and in its place was mischievousness. She sat down carefully on the bed, resting her free hand over her flat belly.

“I have wonderful news for you, Sister. Come, sit with me.”

Karin moved slowly, trying her hardest to think of anything other than babies, and madwomen. Had Hikari not been so far along her personal path to madness, she would have picked up on her sister’s reluctance immediately.

“Now, rest your hand on my stomach. Yes, just where mine is. Can you feel it? It’s a bit early yet, but sometimes I think I can feel it kicking. The baby, I mean. My child.”

Had there been a child inside of her, Karin could have felt it. Kouji had removed her ear cuff limiter when she was recuperating, and she hadn’t been well enough to wear it since. Yet there was no disparate flow of blood within her, no second heartbeat adding depth to her own. Hikari’s pregnancy was just another construct of her madness, and it was frightening enough that Karin was prepared to admit that she might have been wrong. Perhaps this wasn’t simply guilt over teaming up with Fujiwara Souri, or even poisoning men. Her eyes dropped to the box that Hikari hadn’t let go of since she had entered the room...and had with her when she had been hiding in the passageway.

Maybe Kouji was right. It was time to check. Praying that Hikari’s mercurial moods would continue, she asked lightly, “Is that our father’s box?”
Hikari’s face went curiously blank. “Oh yes. Thank you so much for bringing it. It has been...a comfort to me.” Yet her lack of expression did not reflect any such comfort. Her lips twisted into a grimace as she spoke, and for a moment she looked helpless.

Karin hummed. Perhaps if she remained casual, Hikari might trust her with it. “And did you find a way to open it? Father once said there was a trick to it, but that he had forgotten-”

“There is no trick. The box does not open.”

“But-”

“It does not open, Karin.”

She suddenly broke down in tears, and all Karin was watch helplessly. For several minutes she merely watched Hikari’s shoulders shake, and listened to her sobs. Yet when she steeled herself to put her arm around her sister’s shoulder, Hikari broke off from weeping and jumped to her feet. “Once up-” Her sobs stopped her, but she swallowed back her tears, bringing the hand holding the box across her face to wipe her tears. Instead, she caught the edge of the box on her cheek, leaving a quickly blossoming bruise along her cheekbone.

“Hika-”

Hikari ignored both her sister and her injury, intent on resuming her story. “Once upon a time, there was girl. She was a beautiful girl, and was born for happiness, no matter what anyone else said. She loved the garden, and being alone, and brilliance. One day, she met her cousin, who shone brighter than the sun in all that he did. It was impossible not to love him. So she did. But then things started to go wrong - her father went away, and her mother turned into a witch, and worst of all, her cousin refused to love her back. Eventually he left, just like her father. She couldn’t fix any of it, no matter how she tried. So she was helpless and miserable for years and years and years.

“Then one day, she met the one man powerful enough to save her, and even if she didn’t love him like she had her cousin, she thought she could love him enough. Especially when he promised her everything. Home, safety, children. How could she not say yes to all this? But then even that was a lie. He had said he loved her, needed her, even that he wanted children with her - all of it were lies. He had never thought of her, not like his first wife...and oh, he already had children. Children in abundance.

“Well, this girl had enough of all the lies. She knew that the lies would only continue to fester in the dark, so she opened her eyes and shone the light of truth upon them all. And then-”

She broke off, looking down at Karin as if she just remembered she was not alone.

“And then?” Karin prompted, feeling that this story was somehow the heart of everything. That through this tale was the line of logic that held Hikari from breaking apart completely.

But her sister was done. “No. No more. Not now. Perhaps I will tell you the rest later. But for now… for now I must rest. Pregnant women need their rest, you know.”

There was no way that she could take the box from Hikari without her seriously hurting herself, or perhaps even Karin. It might even push her past the point of no return. Yet she had learned enough, not the least of which was the location of the secret passageway. So she rose quietly and made her way to the door. Hikari did not escort her, she simply watched her go.

Yet at the door Karin paused. Some warning deep in her heart made her speak. “Rest well, Sister. I
love you.”

Hikari said nothing, but her eyes dimmed as Karin walked through the door.

They never saw each other again.

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Takehiro woke with a woman in his arms, and sighed. If the lady had been anyone other than the five year old daughter of the field marshal, he would have been in deep trouble. It was trouble enough as it was. Thanks to her ability, it would be impossible to lie to the girl for very long, yet thanks to her age, she might not understand what being a rare kind actually entailed. Still, the girl worshipped Red, and if told that she had to keep his secret for her, she’d likely do it.

Yet too many people knew about him. The war was over, and the safest thing - the smartest thing - to do was to return to the Enclave, leaving behind his best friends, and a wealth of experiences and opportunities. There he would do his duty (but not with Aya, never with Aya) and grow old and boring among his people. They would be safe, because he would not be selfish and do what he truly wanted to do, which was go off with Kouji and Red and found that school for youngsters and make a new life, and-

He closed his eyes and groaned quietly. If he allowed himself to think this way, he would regret this selflessness for the rest of his life. He had to find a way to be happy with the way his life used to be, before he had slain dragons and demon kings, and gotten drunk with foreigners, and earned the respect and confidence of several of the highest placed noblemen in the land. He had risen from rags to riches, Rin would say, yet remembering her gave him a bit more backbone. No matter how unfortunate his situation seemed, it was nothing compared to hers. At least he was not hopelessly in love with someone he could never have...even if he was living out a shadow of a life, and when given the choice to step out into the sunlight he scuttled further back into the dark.

Hideyoshi strode into his tent, abruptly derailing his thoughts. He looked frazzled, and Takehiro knew that he’d woken to find his daughter missing from his tent, just next door. Yet when he recognized his daughter in another man’s bed, his eyebrows rose. Takehiro braced for the storm, but it seemed that the field marshal’s relief was greater than his indignation.

Traitorously, Maka chose that precise moment to snuggle in closer to him. Takehiro scowled down at her. Clearly, women cared not at all for his preservation. He should swear them off, he really, truly, should.

“If Maka were even a year older and not recovering from an inexplicable and dangerous overuse of her power, I would have incredibly stern words for this tableau. As it is, I merely offer my apologies - I was far too overworked to come back to my tent last night. Here. Let me take her back. One of the healers has offered to look after her, and begin to assess her training regimen.”

Maka stirred as Hideyoshi untucked her from the bed, quietly inquiring, “Papa?”

Hideyoshi murmured something to her that Takehiro missed by exiting the bed himself. The girl
waved sleepily back to him as they left, and Takehiro found his fingers waggling in response. Gods above, these power users were going to be the death of him. Inch by inch they had wormed their way into his heart, until his earlier, blanket hatred of their kind had been nearly forgotten. He tried to remember the terrifying interlude with Kyo, or the earth dragon, when he had been sure discovery and death was imminent. Yet even the memories that rose to the fore were the Shihoin’s bravery and courage, and their risking everything to protect him. Takehiro sighed. If he could not longer muster up the hatred he had once felt for power user here, how in earth could he inoculate himself against the charms of those hypothetical youngsters...many of whom had likely never learned to hate and fear rare kinds?

He was doomed. Yet all of this was moot, because he wasn’t going! He was staying here, in the Enclave, and-

Hideyoshi strode right back into his tent, and it was fortunate that Takehiro had dressed as he ruminated, as the field marshal gave him no time to prepare. “We need to discuss the future. Now that the war is over, there is no beating around the bush - too many know of you. Worst of all, my brother knows you, and if you remain here he will ferret out your secrets in very little time. Now, I can protect you until the Shihoins are ready to leave—”

Even though he had just determined within himself to remain at the enclave, his rebuttal was quiet, and noticeably reluctant. “I’m not going with them.”

It was enough to stop Hideyoshi in his tracks. His eyes flew to Takehiro’s, and for an instant they gleamed furiously. Then he took a deep breath. “I think I misheard. Come again?”

Takehiro swallowed. He wasn’t quite sure why Hideyoshi seemed so angry, but it couldn’t be a good thing. “I’m staying. I have...obligations.” When the field marshal’s expression grew darker, he found himself bumbling in his haste to explain. “I wish I could go, but I can’t. I can’t. I promised. And-and I won’t be discovered. We’ll just have to fake my death, like we’d originally planned. It won’t be hard. I could maybe even pretend to kill myself or something—but—”

“And your obligations mean more to you than your relationships with the Shihoins? Perhaps you need to remember your obligations to them.”

Every word was like metal over stone, and Takehiro flinched. “What are you...oh, about the school? I never promised Kouji anything, Hideyoshi. I told him I couldn’t do it, even then! I mean, of course I’d love to, but I can’t—”

Then, for the first time since Takehiro had known him, Hideyoshi grew so angry that he lost control over his power. All the metal in the tent - including the rivets holding the lamps in place, assorted weaponry, and Takehiro’s belt buckle - suddenly came rushing towards Hideyoshi, ripping free of whatever had held them previously. Had Takehiro buckled his belt, he would have been dragged along with it.

“What in hell’s name is wrong with you? Do not play dumb with me, Takehiro! What about your obligations to Karin? Is she worth nothing to you?”

“To Red? What on earth—”

Were his power over flame, Hideyoshi’s glare would have set the tent to burning. “She may have hidden her heart from her cousin, but not from me. Nor you. Do you attempt to deny your mutual affections and all it represents?”

*Hideyoshi was trying to imply that he and Red were lovers.* In the space of his ridiculous
realization, his confusion and fear over Hideyoshi’s incredible overreaction fanned the burn of anger deep in his gut. That, along with his own personal helplessness, set him well on the way to a fury that would match the field marshal’s. After all, if Hideyoshi was going to continue this poor joke for this long, he could hardly be expected to hold his own temper! “Hideyoshi, you misunderstand-”

“If you stand there and deny it you are not the man I thought you were. To trifle with such a woman’s feelings-”

“I’m not the one she’s in love with!” Takehiro could take no more of his friend’s ridiculous claims, and he erupted with enough force to cut through Hideyoshi’s rage. Yet before the silence between them could settle and he could think better of continuing, he did so. “Don’t play this game, Hideyoshi. You know exactly who she’s in love with. You must know. Of course you were never expected to notice her, not as a married man. But if you cannot respect her feelings enough to give them credence, then say nothing at all. Don’t try to pretend that it is me that she has loved ever since she’s come to this country. Not when we both know that it is y-”

Too late, Takehiro stopped himself. Hideyoshi’s expression had gone from rage to unearthly blankness in the space of Takehiro’s declaration, and it was then that he realized something terrible. Hideyoshi had somehow - not known of Red’s painfully obvious affections for him. Yet now, thanks to Takehiro and his big, fat mouth, he did.

Takehiro sucked in a breath past his teeth, and frantically tried to think of a way to salvage this situation. When nothing but the devastation Red would feel when he told her of his mistake came to mind, he began stammering. “I- that was... I was just joking. Of course we’re together, it was what you always suspected, and…” When Hideyoshi’s expression did not change in the slightest, Takehiro trailed off. His superior was a stoic man, but this level of inexpressiveness was unnatural...and when Takehiro reflected further, somewhat insulting. Red wasn’t unattractive, just foreign. And even if she wasn’t to Hideyoshi’s taste, he shouldn’t be struck dumb with disgust!

There was nothing else it could be, Takehiro reasoned. It was the only explanation that readily made sense in such an awkward situation. The realization was a fortunate one, as it caused his loyalty to Red to unstopper his tongue, and he found himself speaking as he hoped Kouji would, in defense of her honor. “We will never speak of this again. And she is leaving, so you will not be burdened with the knowledge of her feelings for long. So as her friend - and only her friend - I ask if you could manage to treat her with the exact same respect as you did before you knew.”

That caused something to flicker across Hideyoshi’s face, but it was gone too quickly for even Takehiro’s eyes to decipher. When nearly a minute passed and the field marshal still did not speak, Takehiro prompted him, intent on having his word. “Hideyoshi?”

He spoke in a quiet, disbelieving tone, and would not meet Takehiro’s gaze straight on. “I understand. I...apologize for the misunderstanding, and my silence. I’ve just been reflecting. This...things will be a bit awkward now. I had planned on giving you all a gift. I-” He lifted his unbroken arm to card his fingers through his hair, clutching at his braid. “I suppose I should give them all to you, and let you do with them as you see fit. That I way I won’t...we won’t…”

He trailed off, and Takehiro’s eyebrows rose. Guilt and anger warred within him in equal measure. He should never have revealed Red’s secret, no matter how angry he was - yet he really hadn’t meant to send Hideyoshi into a mild state of shock. “Won’t what?”

Hideyoshi exhaled roughly and picked up his lost trail of thought, turning brisk and businesslike. “I will pass them along with you in the chance that I will not arrive in time to say goodbye. To Kouji, I leave a blade. It is in my tent - I will bring it when you leave for the palace. Merely tell him that I
hope the inscription proves as valued and insightful as our friendship.” He swallowed. “To his cousin...I leave a little story Maka wrote for her, dictated to me. It… is simplistic, and perhaps a good starting point if she were ever to learn to read our language. Let her know that I will do everything in my power - everything - to keep Maka safe and...and loved.”

Takehiro looked down as he remembered Red castigating Hideyoshi about the welfare of his daughter. Clearly, her admonition had not strayed far from his thoughts. He nodded. “I understand. I will let them both know.”

“And to you, I leave my family’s holdings in Japan.”

Takehiro’s head whipped up, and for the first time since the revelation about Red’s feelings his friend was looking right at him. His surprise caused Hideyoshi to smile ever so slightly. “What? Holdings? Japan?” He shook his head. “What part of ‘I’m not leaving’ didn’t you understand the first time?”

“And why is that?”

“I have obligations here. That is all I will say.”

The field marshal broke his gaze, looking thoughtfully towards the sentries standing guard 20 feet away. Pitching his voice low, he looked back meaningfully at the rare kind. “If the only thing holding you back is your secret village, rest assured, Takehiro, they will not miss you. The fact that they let you enter my service means they were prepared to lose you. And there is no future for you there. You cannot deny this. Besides, think of the good you could do for them if you were able to foster goodwill abroad. No longer would they have to live their lives in secrecy in some forgotten corner of the kingdom - if you paved the way, they could live freer than they’ve ever known.”

Takehiro, who had faced down demons and dragons with unflinching courage and a severe sense of duty, was now struck with an inescapable sense of doom. He had never once uttered a word of the existence of the Enclave, yet Hideyoshi knew. Worse, now was the fruition of his greatest fear since Red had learned of what he was. He had sworn to the Enclave elders that he would eliminate all who knew of the Enclave’s existence. Yet Hideyoshi had been his first real friend, and the first man outside the village walls he’d entrusted his secret. He couldn’t strike him down. Now, however, he may be without a choice.

Yet there was also a chance his friend was bluffing. “Secret village? There is no such thing - believe me, my parents had a hard enough time hiding my abilities on their own!”

Hideyoshi’s answering smile was enigmatic, if a bit distracted. “Do you think you are the first rare kind to leave the Enclave? That you follow no one’s footsteps? I have known of rare kinds all my life, due to my father’s best friend being one. He claimed that he left his village as there was an influx of men his generation, and as such was allowed to leave without fathering children. Yet I suspect it was the affection and friendship of my father that convinced him to leave...along with your reasons of seeking out opportunity. He left the village before you were born, but I can supply you with his name, if you require proof.”

Truthfully, Takehiro did not. What little he knew seemed to match perfectly with Hideyoshi’s explanation - just as there was an influx of women in his generation, so there had been the opposite the generation prior. There had been many men who chose to live as bachelors, yet others had been allowed to make for Japan, to see if they could establish a home for themselves there. None had ever returned, and none had sent word. Yet the Enclave was safe, and still a mystery to the power users. It was assumed all had ultimately perished, keeping the secret of their existence.
This was the first he had ever heard of one of his lost brethren’s fates. And even if it were a less likely story, he would still take Hideyoshi at his word. “I neither confirm nor deny any of what you just said. Yet even if there was a hypothetical village I was bound to...I would not turn my back on them. I couldn’t not. It would not be honorable, or right.”

“Even if you were a danger to them?”

“Am I not more of a danger to them out in the world? I am not invulnerable, and I imagine I would be quite susceptible to torture.”

Hideyoshi scoffed. “I doubt you are a weak as you think, Takehiro. I think you are a man who would do anything for those he cared for, no matter how difficult or painful.”

“Well, that makes one of us.”

Hideyoshi shook his head. “You’re also a stubborn fool when you’ve made up your mind. I can be just as stubborn. My holdings are yours, signed over to you in your name. Do with them what you wish. Remember to give my...my best to the Shihoin, especially if they stick to Kouji’s plan to leave immediately. And.” He cut off, glancing away from Takehiro as he gathered his resolve. “And you do not need to mention to Karin that you...revealed her secret. It would be kinder not to. But of course it is up to you.”

Takehiro nodded. The flippant part of him raised its head, eager to be heard after so much seriousness. “You know, most men would be flattered that the premier lady in Takama ga hara’s military service had a crush on them. You could pretend to be a little happier about it.”

Hideyoshi said nothing, but the look he gave Takehiro as he turned to leave caused his stomach to flip over. The expression in his eyes was so pure and deep that it took Takehiro a moment to register what it was, and when he did, it struck Takehiro speechless. Hideyoshi was near stricken with grief, and it was not at all the proper response to a subordinate having a hopeless, one-sided crush on him.

Takehiro remained silent as he watched his friend exit the tent, wondering if - and it certainly would not be for the first time - he had somehow gotten it all wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Takehiro can be a bit thick about things, but I love him anyway.

I am so, so sorry about the wait. Real life kind of sucks at the moment, and part of that suckery is insane work hours/duties. But lo and behold, here is another chapter! I will try my best not to wait another 3 months before an update!

Next chapter: Heike makes a long awaited appearance, the identity of the Palace Poisoner is revealed, and things do not go so well for Sakurako.
Decaying Roots of the Empire

Chapter Summary

In which everyone plays the game to vastly different ends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1899

In another corner of the palace - only one hallway’s walk from the holding cells - two men stood together in a dark room. One, pale and thin and disposed towards the dramatic, toyed idly with a chess piece, turning it over between his long fingers. He is tall for an adolescent, yet his shoulders are still thin. There are years of growing ahead of him, even though his power is as an adult’s. Tonight he is proud, and it is easily readable in the extra quarter inch on his enigmatic smile, the bounce in his step, and the jaunty movements of the Bishop he plays with.

The other man is far more difficult to read. He too is tall, yet is as dark as his partner is fair. His bearing is noble, and when he speaks to anyone but his companion - a rare enough occurrence - he takes care to say as little as possible, only mentioning what a child might. Although he refuses to name his age, he has obviously passed out of adolescence, although he too has not yet reached full adulthood. Normally given to stillness, he paced the small room like a prisoner in a cage.

The pale one noticed this, and smiles. “Yukihina...you are so nervous tonight! Be at ease - there is nothing to fear. We have done nothing wrong.”

Yukihina glanced at him from underneath dark brows. “We have not. You have not. But...what if he has?”

Heike’s smile slipped, but he cannot be angry at his friend, not when he is this serious. “Lord Fujiwara - more than anyone - has done nothing wrong. He is a kind man working to obtain the best possible future! He simply does what must be done to save the kingdom.”

Yukihina, knowing his friend’s veneration for his benefactor bordered on hero worship, merely nodded. That they felt differently about Fujiwara Souri was the only shadow over their perfect partnership, but deep down it all amounted to a difference in priorities. Heike, who had been fed on Fujiwara’s dreams since he was a boy, could not see past them. Yukihina, whose only allegiance lay with Heike, could.

Heike sighed, suspecting he knew where the root of Yukihina’s worries lay. "Lord Fujiwara has nothing to do with the poisonings, Yuki. He wasn't even here the night Lord Onuma died - not to mention when Commander Arata was slain." Anger colored his tone at the end. Heike had truly admired Commander Arata, and the man had, during their few months together, taken him under his wing. His death had hit both young men hard, although in Yukihina's case, he worried more about where the fingers would inevitably point.
“I know, Heike. I’m just worried that you’ll become tangled up in the controversy. I don’t want that.” He shifted his broad shoulders, eyes flicking momentarily away from his companion. “I just want you to be safe.”

Heike’s heart swelled before beating an erratic pattern in his chest. No one had ever expressed concern for him before, and he’d never thought he’d needed such a thing. Yet since Yukihina had come into his life - since he’d strong armed the young man into it, honestly speaking - he’d learned that he’d been living without a lot of things: true friendship, constant companionship, and the care and concern that those bring.

There were also times late at night when even Heike’s well-disciplined thoughts began to wander and he wondered about the physical comfort found in Yukihina’s proximity…and how he could possibly live knowing such breathless happiness.

“I will be, Yuki. We both will.” Before he could think better of it Heike crossed the room in several strides, and gripped his friend’s shoulders firmly. He held that position so that Yukihina had no choice but to look down at him, worry darkening his gaze.

“You can’t promise that, Heike. Not when the world is falling to pieces around us.”

The look in Yukihina’s dark eyes was intoxicating, like the bitter red wine Arata had shared with him. It unstuck Heike’s tongue and made him promise madness. “I’ll make us safe, Yuki. I won’t let anything happen to you. I—”

Yukihina stepped closer to him, edging in close enough to brush his nose against Heike’s. The answering flutter in his stomach made him lose his thought, although not his grip. “Yu-Yukihina?”

His partner stayed where he was, his gaze fastened on Heike’s shoulder. He swallowed, and it was the only sign of his nerves. “Then I promise too. I will protect you. I won’t let anything bad—” his breath hitched as Heike’s fingers splayed, brushing against his cool neck, “…happen to you.”

In that moment, the castle could have collapsed on them and Heike would neither have noticed or cared. His head was swimming from the emotion in Yukihina’s normally expressionless voice and the paradoxical warmth and coolness of his physical proximity. They were so close. All he had to do was pull his friend down scant inches - and his hands were already in position, twining around his neck - and tilt forward himself…

Yukihina followed his lead. Their lips brushed together tentatively, and in the wake of even this gentlest of caresses light and ice sparked in their wake. Both men shivered. Heike had been told that kisses were pleasant, and loving even more so. Yet that had been something more than simply pleasant…

Yukihina sighed into their next kiss, and an unexpected fire lit along Heike’s veins, more arousing than the growing confidence of their kiss. This immensely powerful, talented, handsome man was submitting to him. That he was worthy in Yukihina’s eyes fueled his confidence, and Heike found himself taking charge, even though he had never been this close to someone - never been able to be this close to someone - before. He slanted his mouth confidently, if not expertly over Yukihina’s, and was rewarded with cold hands gripping his waist, pulling him closer.

Yet even more seductive than the physical confirmation of their attraction was the thought that he was not alone in his feelings. For months he had battled this sudden and overwhelming desire, and having never experienced any type of emotion like it, had nearly surrendered to it time and time again. Something had held him back, however, and it appeared to be divine providence. If he had surrendered within weeks of knowing Yuki, he could not have answered his feelings this
passionately. This perfectly.

Heat pooled in his loins, and Heike pulled back to take several deep breaths of icy air. The room was lit with thousands of incandescent sparkles as he traced his fingers over Yukihina’s lower lip, trembling slightly as he sucked in ragged breaths of his own.

Heike’s eyes tracked over Yukihina’s face as boldly as his fingers. “You’re so beautiful.” It was a whisper, as he was unwilling to break the moment by speaking any more loudly than this.

Yukihina’s eyes lidded, yet his fingers clenched at Heike’s waist. “Even like this?”

Heike remembered his love’s lost form and smiled. “Both ways. I don’t care. They’re both you.”

“*Heike.*” Yukihina growled as he leaned forward and kissed him deeply, cutting off any further debate. His passion ignited Heike’s once more, and losing the battle within himself to take things slowly, he surrendered.

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_The image distorts and wavers, like ripples on a pond. As before, the viewers are held in a queer state of suspension where they can do nothing but wait for the shifting vision to settle. Yet unlike before, there is a sense of connection between all the watchers, wherein they instinctively know that parts of this interlude are being withheld._

_There is an unspoken consensus of overwhelming relief._

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Hours later, when the walls and furniture were stained with light sears or frozen out of all use - if not a mixture of both - the young men lay tangled together on the most heavily abused area of the room, the bed. Their loving was not entirely gentle, and soon Yukihina was snoring gently, undone by several sleepless nights of watching over Heike and the emotional catharsis of giving in. Heike watches his lover’s chest rise and fall, and with every exhale he feels his joy blossom.

Yet it is not long before guilt edges in, marring his bliss. He has never outright lied to Yukihina, but tonight he had come close. And his promise to keep him safe had been madness. Yukihina had nearly gotten it exactly right earlier, yet it wasn’t the world that was falling to pieces around them - it was the kingdom.

The war against the demons and their dragons was only the outward sign of Takama ga hara’s decay. Lord Fujiwara had uncovered dark plots and designs that reached to the heart of the kingdom itself, and unless the corruption was cured there, the temporary detente in the demon war - and it was a detente, Fujiwara was sure of it - would soon be over. Yet to save their home the kingdom must be purged of all who had enabled this evil...and it would take royal flame to fight royal flame.

The losses would be terrible, and the ultimate target unthinkable...but without such measures, all of Takama ga hara would fail.

Heike shifted uneasily, eyes flickering over Yukihina’s unconscious form. At least he hadn’t had to lie about the poisonings. Neither he or Lord Fujiwara had poisoned anyone, and if the king had been thinking clearly, he would have determined the culprit much sooner. It was at its outset a conundrum, as there was no one who had access to all three slain - Commander Arata, Lord Onuma, and a palace chef. Yet there were several people with access to two of the three, and of those several, only one who could so easily influence a man to sip from a poisoned cup. When the
king discovered the poison took nearly a week to set in along the bloodstream before killing its victim in a few hellacious hours, it would only be a matter of time. Commander Arata had journeyed back to the palace a week before he died to meet with the king’s War Council, and it would have been the work of a moment for the true culprit to offer him a glass of wine, smiling up at him as she did. Lord Onuma would have been even easier, as he was a close friend to the king, and would gladly drink with the king’s wife on any occasion.

The palace chef had been the accident that had acted as her cover, Heike mused, as by then the queen had been confining herself to her bedroom. But she had been sighted in the herb room connected to the kitchens, and in all the confusion could have slipped the poison in anywhere. That the poison had not reached its intended recipient was mere luck - luck, and the fact that the king’s heir had fallen into the habit of eating foods unprepared by those in the palace…

Heike scowled. That the Queen of Heaven had fallen so far as to stoop to such despicable acts only showed just how desperate his homeland’s situation was. It was precisely as Lord Fujiwara had argued. The tainted flowers of the kingdom needed to be pulled up, stem and root, so that new, healthier crops could grow. Fujiwara had known for years of the growing corruption - since the first demons had attacked - but it was only now that the Queen had gone rogue that the necessity for change was imminent. Thankfully, now Fujiwara was being aided by their unrevealed yet powerful benefactor. Thanks to them, they finally had a chance of succeeding and saving their home.

Yet if Yukihina knew how deeply Heike was already embroiled in the purification of the kingdom, he would...well, he wasn’t sure what Yuki would do, but he was sure that he would enjoy none of it. Especially now that they had confessed their love. Of course, the most sensible course of action would be to tell Yukihina all this, to admit that there was a dangerous plot afoot, and that it may fail without their efforts. Yet Heike shied away from that conversation, instinctively knowing that Yukihina’s probing stare and rock-solid sense might puncture a hole in Lord Fujiwara’s arguments. All it would take was one scathing rejoinder on the probability of getting burned when the kingdom was in flames to remind Heike of his foolish promises to keep both of them safe and out of danger. And if Yukihina took his displeasure that one step further and decided to leave him? Well, Heike had been afraid of that ever since the day they met, and even being thus prepared the action would gut him. Now, even more so.

Heike rolled onto his back, staring up at the ice-crusted ceiling. He could not fathom losing Yukihina now. He would just have to play the game even better than before, ensuring that not only did he fulfill Fujiwara’s commands to perfection, but also that he kept Yukihina by his side.

In the slowly fading light, Heike smiled. He had always liked a challenge, after all.

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On the other end of the palace, a small figure darted from shrinking shadow to shadow, creeping along like a master thief. Slowly yet surely they made their way to the greenhouse, stopping only
to open the door - not with any special power or implement, but with a key. Once inside, they
ducked from plant to plant until they reached the far wall. The light from the rising sun illuminated
the greenhouse, and it took only a moment to find the secret door they had once watched the Queen
of All Heaven sneak through.

Sakurakouji Sakurako wasted a few precious moments trying to figure out how to work the
trapdoor before realizing it would be safer and faster to use her power to animate the door. Without
tripping the switch the door swung inward, and she was through.

Once inside the secret passageway, she waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, not
wanting to stumble into easy traps. It gave her a little time to reflect. It was not that she didn’t trust
her cousins, (especially Kouji) but too many things could go wrong with their initial plan.
Originally, Karin was to double back during the war assembly to steal Hikari’s box. As a woman
and a foreigner, she wouldn’t be allowed to attend the whole of the meeting, only the public
address at the beginning. Yet time was still short, and she was far too noticeable for stealth - if
anyone saw her, they would remember her. Sakurako had only been able to convince her to switch
roles about an hour ago, and couldn’t give her any time to change her mind. Although the war
assembly wouldn’t convene until mid-morning, she was going to get that damn box now.

She walked along for the length of several hallways, scanning with her power for anyone else in
the passageway with her. She knew she was close when the passage’s ceiling suddenly dropped
down, forcing her to her hands and knees. How had the queen been able to fit into such a small
space? She was quite small, Sakurako reflected, and not prone to muscle. The foreigner would have
had to crawl on her belly like a snake to get through. The thought made Sakurako grin. Although
she no longer hated her western cousin as she had during their first meeting, she still bore an
irrational grudge about the woman and her pants.

Sighing, Sakurako channeled some life energy into her left hand fingertips so that she could see
more clearly. Eerie shadows reflected off the walls, forming impossible shapes. Wondering what
could be causing these moving shadows, Sakurako stared directly at them. The shadows coalesced
into shapes. That one looked a bit like her mother, flitting about the kitchen to the annoyance of
their cook. And that one looked like her father, musing above a shogi board. The next one was
Kyo, slashing expertly with his katana…and that one was Zed, leaning in towards a smaller,
feminine figure, clearly about to kiss-

Sakurako blinked rapidly, rage dispelling her trance. Brother figure or not there were some things
she was still not prepared to see, even though it was probably happening. She especially didn’t
want to watch it on some wall when she was supposed to be-

Oh death and darkness, how could she have gotten distracted? She had to get in, get the damn box,
and get out as fast as possible! The queen had called for the services of the royal physician this
morning to check on the status of her ‘baby,’ and Sakurako had just wasted precious time staring at
shadow puppets!

She hustled down the rest of the hallway, taking less care than she should have to move as quietly
as possible. The physician couldn’t possibly take all that long to either announce the queen insane
or to play along with a fictitious child, and as soon as the visit was over the queen would retrieve
the box from the secret passageway. Berating herself for wasting time, Sakurako let the light from
her fingers fade away, just in case the queen were to open the door at the other end. Thus
distracted, she barked her knee against something in the darkness.

Swallowing a few choice curses, Sakurako looked down at the object. Whatever it was, it was as
solid as rock, and firmly connected to the floor. Was there some sort of trip switch? If so, she had
just activated a trap…

She relit her fingers so that they glowed with a soft, white light. It was just enough to make out the obstruction - a small, teakwood box, intricately carved…this was it! She hadn’t missed her window of opportunity after all!

Sakurako scuttled backwards so that she could take the box and go...but the box remained glued to the floor, held by some unknown force. Sakurako frowned. Why wasn’t she able to move the damned thing? How had the queen managed to get it to stick there? She tugged again, arching herself so that she could pull with all her might.

It was to no avail. Sakurako slumped forward, breathing heavily. This was simply ridiculous. She was the most powerful woman of the Sakurakouji line, and she couldn’t shift a little box? Distantly she recalled the foreigner’s nervousness about the box - how many times had she reminded Sakurako to be careful? She hadn’t listened then, thinking the foreigner to be a bit of a worrywart.

Sakurako shook her head. None of that mattered. If her physical strength wasn’t enough, she would simply have to rely on her power. Animating objects was simple, and now she only felt stupid for not having thought of it sooner. Without further ado, she focused her concentration on the box - imbuing it with her life power, commanding it to rise and follow her…

There was no warning. As soon as she sent her power into the box it exploded with a dark energy of its own, overpowering her. The connection snapped immediately, and the pulse of energy emanating from the box sent her flying backwards. Her eyes snapped open in surprise, and in the last moment before her head struck the lip of the low ceiling she had time to notice that the box wasn’t plain old teakwood anymore - it was glowing from within with some unearthly light.

Then she collided with the lip of the passage, and knew nothing more.

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Kouji intentionally arrived late to the war assembly, wanting to slip in unnoticed at the edge of the crowd, rather than be a focal point on the dais. Yet he still managed to arrive before the king, and from the look of things no one was quite sure where the king was, or what he was doing. People were milling about in confusion, and general mingled with foot soldier as they all jostled and gossiped, desperate for the news. The war was over, and all had rejoiced. Yet now some new shadow had fallen over the kingdom, and although not nearly as deadly, it held an insidious power over them. Kouji suspected it was because it struck right at the heart of the kingdom, rather than the outskirts.

He skirted the throng, making his way to where he had glimpsed a flash of red in a sea of black. He was surprised - Karin was supposed to be using the confusion to steal Hikari’s box. There must have been a need for a change in plan, and Kouji suspected she wouldn’t be the bearer of happy news.

Yet before he reached her he recognized the man she was standing next to, and clearly whispering to out of the corner of her mouth. Kouji’s apprehension vanished, replaced with relief. Karin had
told him that Takehiro had awoken and was recovering apace, but to see him healthy with his own eyes was something quite different. His dark mood vanished and he swept towards them.

“So, uh, is there a reason we’re talking but not allowed to look at each other? No one’s looking at us, Takehiro. We look like idiots.”

“No, no, Red. This is very important, because otherwise I couldn’t do this. Um. Red. Karin. I have to tell you something.”

That overheard exchange brought Kouji up short, only a few paces behind his friends. His took in Takehiro’s nervousness, and he remembered Hideyoshi’s fears. Could this possibly be a romantic interlude? Perhaps he had been more correct than he’d known with his lie to the king that Takehiro would leave Takama ga hara as Karin’s fiance. Kouji grimaced. He never would have guessed it, but if it made them happy, he certainly wouldn’t oppose it...even if the idea did make him somewhat uncomfortable.

“Tell me something? Oh no. It’s not about Maka, is it? Is she all right?” Immediately ignoring Takehiro’s request not to look at him, she turned and grasped his arm. “She didn’t relapse, did she?”

Takehiro’s eyes flicked down nervously to where she touched him. “What? Oh, no. No, she’s fine. I’m sorry, that wasn’t what I mean to say, that’s not what I need to talk about…” He winced, and took a steeling breath. “Ok. No matter what I tell you, we’re still best friends, right?”

Karin nodded hesitantly, not taking her eyes off his face or her hand off his arm.

“And...you know that I won’t let anyone...hurt you, yeah?”

Karin’s head stopped mid nod. “Takehiro. What did you do?”

“I - Red, ah damn it. Red, I know you’re not going to like this, but...”

“Kouji!” Three heads whipped around to face the speaker, Hideyoshi Fujiwara. He’d had to shout quite loudly to be heard over the din, and Kouji’s brows furrowed. He couldn’t have waited one more moment to make his presence known? Clearly Takehiro was about to confess something, and if it had the power to hurt his cousin, Kouji wanted to know what it was.

After warmly greeting the field marshal, Kouji caught a glimpse of Takehiro’s ashen expression out of the corner of his eye. That was odd... He wasn’t a romantic man by any means, but he had no idea why Hideyoshi’s suddenly appearing in the middle of Takehiro’s awkward confession was enough to make him look that panicked.

...Although Hideyoshi had seemed to be somewhat against such a union. Perhaps he had counseled Takehiro against pursuing Karin, and Takehiro was ignoring his advice?

Hideyoshi seemed not to notice it, however. He bowed to Takehiro, and then, after a momentary hesitation, to Karin. The motion didn’t seem to ease Takehiro’s nerves any, and the man practically swayed on his feet. Judging from Karin’s confused expression, she didn’t understand either. Kouji frowned. Perhaps there was some lasting damage from his fall? Perhaps he had misjudged the situation entirely?

He gave up. This was why he had nothing to do with women, men, or anything that spelled romance.

Karin glanced over at him as the field marshal clapped a hand on their rare friend’s shoulder,
momentarily blocking him from view. “Our young ally is going after the box as we speak. We can meet up with her after the meeting - she said she would wait in the heir’s chambers with her friend.” Her whisper was in her native tongue and to his ears only, drifting on the wind in the manner they had perfected. He nodded in return. He was not very good with the technique, and it was difficult enough to use in such a crowded room, with sounds echoing from every corner. Yet the news set him at ease. Using their younger cousin was not his first choice, as he didn’t want to involve those he could not personally vouchsafe their safety. Sakurako was a determined little thing, however, and as long as they retrieved the box at the end he couldn’t complain.

Karina fidgeted at his side, eyes locked on Takehiro and Hideyoshi. Kouji glanced over as well, but all he could hear from his particular angle - damn the room’s echoing acoustics - was Hideyoshi’s last admonition. “…you to say nothing, Takehiro. I mean it. Especially if it hurts...won’t forgive…”

He glanced over at his cousin whose eyes had cast down as she chewed her lip. He suspected that she might have heard more - and perhaps had a better understanding of this whole scenario? Kouji scowled. He hated not know what was going on, and as soon as he got one of them alone, he was forcing it out of them.

Hideyoshi then turned, having bullied Takehiro enough. “Good evening to both of you. I trust I haven’t missed too much?”

Karin was still examining the floor with that puzzled look on her face, so Kouji answered for both of them. “No, no. The king hasn’t even arrived for the public speech yet. You wouldn’t know what the holdup is, would you?”

The field marshal shook his head. “I’ve only just arrived, at the king’s urgent summons. He requested my presence immediately, yet did not tell me why. I feared the worst, but it seems that none of my fears have yet come to pass.” He blinked and glanced over at Karin, whose eyes dropped to his chest the moment after they connected. Hideyoshi swallowed, and Karin’s eyebrows furrowed, her head cocking slightly to the side.

Kouji knew that face. She made that exact expression every time she was confused by something and took a moment to puzzle it out. What she could be wondering about now was beyond him, but if it was connected to the way Takehiro’s eyes were once again practically bulging out of their sockets, Kouji was definitely going to find out.

“But it is good that I found you all so quickly. I had hoped to find a moment to inform you of Maka’s condition, Lady Shihoin. She is doing well, and is beginning her training with one of the healers. She...she sends her love.”

The field marshal’s address was enough to shake her out of her concentration. Karin ignored the stilted awkwardness in his tone, and smiled naturally at him, clearly relieved that the little scamp was well. “That’s good to hear, Field Marshal. I had worried about her-”

She interrupted herself with a little intake of breath and an expression of amazement bloomed across her face. Seeing it, the field marshal stiffened, yet it caused Takehiro to leap into action. Sidling close her to, he discreetly gripped her wrist so that it might not be overtly obvious that he was touching her, and canceling out her powers.

“Ah, Red - forgot to tell you. I have your, uh, earring thing. You know, the one you accidentally left behind when we were recovering?”

She had turned to him with a look of wonder on her face, but his words seemed to snap her out of her trance. “Oh my lim- yes. Yes, I know exactly what you’re talking about. Thank-”
Kouji understood. Perhaps her puzzlement earlier, as well. When Karin didn’t wear her limiter, her power over blood trumped her control over wind. She had very likely been distracted by the constant, overlapping drumbeat of every heart in the room. “Karin. You’re not wearing your limiter?”

Takehiro and Hideyoshi looked surprised at Kouji’s use of Karin’s native tongue. He spoke it rarely in front of them, although Karin tended to slip up often in front of their rare friend, especially when they were drinking. “How could you go so long without it? What if someone discovers you?”

Karin swallowed nervously. “I couldn’t wear it when I was recovering…and then I lost it. But Takehiro found it. There’s no harm done.”

“Do you not remember what you are? I can’t believe you were so careless!”

Karin scowled. “Kouji. Don’t do this here. We’ll talk about this later—”

Silence rippled through the crowd like a tangible presence, causing all four to turn and look at the origination point, the dais. There a man stood, having strode in just moments before. The man looked harried and old, and it took Kouji a long moment to realize that it was in fact the king. He hadn’t looked like that when they last spoke only a few days ago - now he looked ill, practically swaying with exhaustion. What could have happened between then and now to enable such a transformation?

Unlike the four of them, the rest of the room had broken out into whispers, little susurrations of disbelief when they recognized the state of the king. The room quieted down again when the king threw his arms out in a dramatic gesture. Kouji almost expected to see him stagger for balance afterwards.

“People of Takama ga hara - hear me! I bring you word and accusation of the one man who would shake this kingdom to its core - the man who poisoned Lord Onuma, Commander Arata, and Chef Iori. No, do not be alarmed - he has already been apprehended. I bring him before you now to denounce the man who attempted to overthrow the throne...and to show how futile his attempts were!”

The king paused expectantly, and the crowd broke out into scattered, reluctant applause. This was all too sudden for hearty congratulations - and there was a sense of calculation as one turned to another, locating their friends, trying to figure out who was not in attendance…

Next to him, Hideyoshi stiffened, and made a quiet noise of distress. It caught Karin and Takehiro’s attention as well, and they all turned to look at him. Yet the only one he addressed was the rare kind.

“Takehiro. I fear we did not watch him well enough.” His pain was evident even through his wry tones.

Takehiro grimaced. “Your brother? But—”

“Good people of the kingdom! I present to you our villain, Lord Fujiwara Souri!” The king gestured once more, and from a hidden, back door, the man was brought out to the dais in chains. He had clearly been beaten. One eye was blackened, blood crusted around the manacles at his ankles and wrists, and he walked with a pronounced limp, favoring his left leg. Yet he stood as tall and as proudly as he could, so much so that Kouji - who had only heard of his transgressions but never experienced any firsthand - thought for a fleeting moment, *this man is innocent.*
Immediately, he set aside his conviction. How could the King of Heaven be wrong? Besides, if even Hideyoshi seemed unsurprised - pained, but unsurprised - at his brother’s defection, how could he disbelieve?

“This, my people, is the powerless snake whom we fostered among us, that has dared to bite at our very breast! Through his ambition and greed he sought to take control of the kingdom, all to fuel his selfish ends. We have from him a written confession outlining his plan, and it is not just me that he targeted. He has gone so far as to engineer the demise of your queen - and for that, I cannot forgive him.

“Thankfully, we were able to catch this traitor in time, and his plans have unravelled. The queen will recover from her sickness, rather than succumbing to a slow and lingering death. So too will the kingdom! We have not fallen to trickery or treachery, demons or dragons...never shall we fall to the vainglory of a single man.

“People! For the good and glory of Takama ga hara!”

Kouji and his companions cheered, as they must. As everyone must. Yet out of the corner of his eye he observed Karin stiffen, and understood that they both knew. The king was lying. Whether it was only about Hikari’s connection to Fujiwara or about all of it he didn’t know, but one lie was enough when it meant a man’s life.

Yet what could they do? The king was still the most powerful man in the kingdom, even if he was acting erratically. He had also given them their way to escape. Staying behind and attempting to extricate what may be an innocent man - although undoubtedly devious - could doom them as well...yet damn him for a fool, Kouji was considering it.

Blaming this man wasn’t justice. It was folly. Especially if the king was doing it with his eyes wide open.

The king shoved Fujiwara to his knees, yet before he could intone the man’s sentence, the double doors at the end of the hall flung open. A moment was lost as the entire congregation jostled and turned to catch the interruption, and the king looked up with a forbidding expression at the intruder. His expression eased into shock when he realized the state of the messenger, however.

He was no more than a boy, arrayed in a torn mockery of the army’s uniform. Blood dripped from open wounds as he fell to the side, catching himself on the door. He gasped for breath, and several near him moved to help him. He waved them off, and moved like a man possessed: eyes glassy and unfocused; he was pushed past the point of mortal endurance.

The boy staggered forward a few more steps. Finally, his expression cleared and a look of wonder lit his face, as if he hadn’t been sure he would live to see his destination. “Your highness,” he croaked, and in a visceral display, turned to spit more blood upon the polished parquet flooring. “I beg you - apologize. The dragon. It’s come. From the north. Wiped out-” he stumbled here, and only the nearest nobleman’s quick grab kept him on his feet. “Wiped out 2nd, 5th, and 8th regiments. Too powerful. No chance. Wind and flame. They told me to run. To warn. Ran three days. Villages on fire. Villagers dead. Everyone dead. It was Asura. Asura.” His eyes dimmed, and he slumped against the nobleman. To his credit, the lord did not let go.

The messenger’s mouth fell slack, and there was life and breath for only one more plea. “Save us.”

The silence that fell was absolute. Not a single being moved, all held their breath. Finally the prisoner moved, raising his head so that he could look into the king’s eyes.
His words were for the king only, but in the stillness Kouji could make them out, as clear as if the man were speaking just for him. “Decay is deadliest when it begins at the root, your highness. Falsely accusing me will not save the kingdom. You know what will. Will you continue to ignore it?”

For a long moment the king stared down at him, calm and impenetrable. Nothing of his thoughts could be read on his face. Finally he broke the moment by glancing back over to the messenger’s corpse, whom the nobleman had laid out on the floor. He nodded to it, and several of his guards stepped close. “Find out who he was, and send word to his family. Bury him among the honored warriors in the crypt.” He turned to face the rest of the congregation. “Send word to all the soldiers returned home - we have one more war to wage. This dragon is our final test, and we shall defeat it for the good of our kingdom. Then, peace shall come. Peace will be ours.”

The King of All Earth breathed deeply, erecting a visage that was as serene as the ocean waves. “The prisoner shall meet his fate once the dragon is defeated. Prepare yourselves. We march out tomorrow morning at dawn.”

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Chapter End Notes

Kouji is way overestimating Karin’s ability with the whole heartbeat thing. One in particular, though, I think she could manage…

Oh look, an update before February ended! Go me :)

Next chapter: Toki has a stern talk with himself, Sakura chases a lead but catches only confusion, and Rei finally gets a little bit serious.
Toki was not having a very good time of it. Granted, no one was. Yet while he wasn’t moping as hard as Ogami was, nor was as withdrawn as Karin and Kouji, he had a sulk hovering like a storm cloud above his head. It was too bad he had finished off his emergency pack of cigs the other night with Shibuya, because he could use something right now, and he wanted it to be the exact goddamn brand of smokes his old man had used.

It wasn’t like he felt sorry for him, or anything. Sure, the King of All Earth seemed like kind of a dick, and the Queen of Heaven was clearly crazy as hell. So what if his father was innocent for once? Being falsely accused couldn’t excuse all the evil he had gone on to instigate. No, he just wanted...well, he wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted. To feel close to him, for just a moment? Or maybe to honor the kid he had been, to believe in his dad like he wasn’t an evil shithead? Toki wasn’t sure, but if anyone ever asked, he was just going through nicotine withdrawals.

Personally, Toki blamed the stupid story. It was making everyone think about who the previous generation had been, and how much had changed. All Toki could wonder was if his old man had always been evil? Or had his bullshit story about being betrayed sort of been true? … No, it didn’t matter. His old man had planned to whammy the king, and no matter how it tugged at Toki’s heart, he knew he couldn’t pity his old man. That he was young and smiled surprisingly naturally and was obviously less of a genocidal dickhead did not spell his innocence, even if it made Toki want to curl up and smoke a whole goddamn pack of cigarettes.

So Toki was a bit on edge. What else was new? It wasn’t like he was the only one. Today’s sparring was slowly shifting from uncomfortable to full out disaster: Karin was distracted and Kouji was straight up moping, and although they were still beyond his level, it was clearly enough to throw them off their game. Rui, oddly enough, was even worse. She vacillated between ruthless and hesitant, jerking between the two extremes with no warning or awareness of what might potentially cost her life in a real battle.

Unfortunately for him, their sparring configuration made it impossible for him to snap any of them
out of it. While Rei and Sakurako were off fighting in the adjacent basement training room - and likely gearing up to implement Yuuki’s imminent and excruciatingly painful demise, he was gonna’ call it how it was - he, Shibuya and Kouji on Team Puppeteer were facing off Zed, Karin, and Rui on Team Dragon.

Team Dragon had a base plan - Karin had to go up against Asura, as her blood was what had bound it - or so they all claimed. They hadn’t gotten to that part of the story yet, so for now Toki would only have to take her word for it. No one was admitting to what they expected to happen when Karin faced Asura again, although it didn’t take a genius - of which he was one, thank you - to know exactly how they expected her and Asura’s reunion would go.

Zed also was an immovable member of Team Dragon, as he would have to open a rift into Hell to trap Asura there. He was the backup plan in case outright killing the dragon was beyond their reach. Either way, between the two of them everyone assumed Asura was pretty much taken care of. The last member of the team - Rui - would deal more with damage control and harrying Asura so that Karin wouldn’t be a sitting duck.

Yet the team was simply not gelling. Karin and Zed were clearly unused to fighting together, and if it hadn’t been for the necessity of their fighting together when they faced Asura, Toki didn’t doubt that they would have chosen vastly different teams. Rui, however, was even worse. Too often he found himself opposite Rui just in time to keep her from flaring with uncontrollable energy, often in response to Kouji’s inexplicable behavior - Toki wasn’t going to lie to himself, something was better than Rui’s look of determination as she doggedly sought after a conflict with Kouji, trying to translate their emotional strife into a physical confrontation.

Yet Toki could kind of understand why Rui was working so hard to fight Kouji, by this point. Kouji’s odd behavior made not a lick of sense, however. It became obvious as the morning dragged on that he flat out refused to face her, ducking and weaving between Shibuya and his battles, often horning in to engage Karin by taunting her in her native tongue.

Maybe all the Shihoins in the house were all going a little stir crazy, as the few times Toki tried to engage Karin he fared about as well as Rui. She was displaying similar avoidance tactics as Kouji, except she was practically funnelling him into skirmishes with Rui, the weakest member of the other team. At the beginning Toki had figured it was in response to her cousin’s odd behavior, but then he realized her protection extended to whenever he began to face Zed, as well. Clearly, she didn’t trust him to handle harder encounters...or herself to see him fail. And that was the last damn straw.

He waited for a lull in the battle. It helped that Zed seemed to catch onto his resolve and stepped back for a breather, tripping Kouji into Rui’s path so that he could swerve away. Then Toki pushed with his power so that every metal surface in the basement vibrated and rang, piercing the air in a discordant chorus.

Karin and Shibuya broke off with a jolt, the only two people in the basement who were sparring seriously. Even then, it looked suspiciously like Shibuya was pulling her hair, and she kicked his backside as he turned to Toki. Toki ignored his ignoble yelp and settled his gaze on Zed, who was one of the few people in the room who hadn’t annoyed him this morning.

Then he smiled his best salesman smile, the one that he had absolutely not inherited from his father. “Oooooook! Great work, everyone. Take five. And um, I’ve got an idea - ‘cuz this shitshow certainly needs one or two, let’s be honest - how about Rui and I switch teams?”

“No.” Both Kouji and Karin spoke at the same time in the exact same determined tone. Then they
glanced at each other briefly, almost as if surprised at the other’s vehemence. Toki took advantage of the momentary lull to keep going, ignoring the initial refusal.

“Oh, c’mon, guys. Let’s just try it out - just for fun.”

Shibuya glanced warily at the Shihoin cousins, before tentatively tossing his hat into the ring. “It does make a certain amount of sense. Having the three taboo power users on one team could backfire, and there does seem to be a certain level of...hesitancy with our current teams-”

“That’s only because we’re fighting each other,” Kouji interrupted, muttering from the side of his mouth as he did his utmost to not look at Rui. “It will be different when we’re in position.”

Zed snorted. “Oh please. Like that has been an acceptable excuse ever. You know what? I agree with the smokestack over there. Let’s switch ‘em out. See what happens.”

Toki scowled at the smoking reference as he’d been pretty damn good before he’d had to see his father all young and smirky and questionably in love. But he didn’t protest as now it was suddenly looking good for a case of majority rules, and as long as Rui didn’t suddenly jump the Team Shihoin ship, they might be getting somewhere. Just to be safe he sidled up to her and slung an arm over her shoulder, ignoring the dark look both she and Kouji shot him. Leaning close he whispered in her ear, ”Change of tactic, Rui. Kouji can duck and run all day - but when you’re on his team he’s gotta’ be aware of every move you make, no? And this way you can protect him...” He leaned back and fixed her a significant look, eyebrows raised expectantly.

Just as he suspected she took the bait, but not without an exasperated smile. “You’re terrible, Toki.”

“But…?”

Rui cleared her throat and addressed the room. “Yeah, I’d be down for switching. Especially if it means getting away from the dirty old man over there.”

Zed put on an expression of obviously false affront. “What? Dirty and old I may be, but I’m also charming.”

Kouji swore and stalked off past Shibuya, who backtracked to try and settle him down like a trainer might a spooked horse. The only other dissenter turned and stared Toki down with a disconcertingly powerful, heterochromatic gaze. He met the challenge and flattened his expression. The sun would rise in the west the day someone was more mulish than him, after all.

Finally Karin heaved a sigh and pulled blood from a cut on her arm into a perfect sphere that she held in her palm. She glanced at it for a moment, and Toki felt vindicated - stare down rights were his! Yet then she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and came right out with it: “I don’t want you on this team.”

Well. Blunt half-blood was blunt. Then again, those very terms described him, too. “Yeah I got that. You know what I’d like?”

Her eyes narrowed, and Rui must have found the urge to wander off pressing, as she backed away slowly with her hands up. Toki didn’t glance away from the pissy foreigner who was underestimating him even now. “I do not especially care, Toki.”

“Well, that’s too bad. Especially because all I’d like is for our missions to be completed successfully, and for all the baddies to be spanked so soundly they cry. And honestly, sweetheart, you and your cousin are being a bit pigheaded about this. There is no frickin’ scenario where Kouji and Rui fight each other successfully, you know that. Not when they can’t just man up and make
some goddamn kisses, already.” That shifted her attention for the briefest moment, just enough time for her eyes to flick over to where Kouji and Shibuya were talking, making sure they weren’t overheard.

Toki practically growled. “Lady, you gotta’ stop being so damn cautious. Yeah, shit went down in the past. Bad shit, and I’m sorry for it. But I’m not sorry that my Lady Aunt showed me, ‘cuz otherwise I’d have been sitting here stressing out about how to prove myself to you; how to show you that I’m stronger and more capable than any Fujiwara you’ve ever known. But thanks to her, I know the truth - that I don’t need to. All your fears and insecurities aren’t about me, sweetheart, and we both know it. Whatever happened in the past, I’m not going to be the Fujiwara that lets you down.”

Halfway through his spiel she had stiffened, yet her shock at his temerity was enough to keep her eyes wide and unguarded. Toki figured he had about twenty seconds before she struck him down where he stood, so he leaned in just enough so that he could whisper the killing blow and not be overheard by every person in the basement.

“Whatever else happens out there, I promise you this: I’m not going to be the Fujiwara that dies on your watch.”

Then he strode past her, twisting an iron bar into a makeshift sword and settled across from Rui, who smiled at him viciously as she prepared a katana of shadow. He grinned back, glad that at least she had his back. “Let’s do this, Ru. Then maybe everybody else will join in. On three! One, two…”

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Rei shoved back against Sakurako, mind reeling. “What did you say?”

There was a flash of her grin before she flipped backwards, arcing gracefully on the fall to catch the swing of her sword against her own. With a deft flick of her wrist his strike skittered wide, and she danced to the side, as nimble as a fox. “I said that Yuuki is a handsome enough boy...it’s a pity he’s a power user, otherwise I’d put in a good word for him with my daughter. Oh, but I suppose you’re not so keen on that, are you?”

Rei briefly entertained the possibility of burning her alive by slow, torturous degrees, but knew that it probably wasn’t possible. Her power was over life itself, after all. Also, Sakura would probably not forgive him the murder of her mother. “I have nothing to do with Sakurakouji-san’s suitors. I doubt that Yuuki will get that far, however. Shibuya will no doubt put an end to that.”

Sakurako laughed delightedly, yet it wasn’t enough to distract Rei from her sudden barrage of moves. For a moment all was movement and the clash of steel and the space in between, yet just as suddenly as she attacked, she retreated. Rei frowned. Out of all their fighting styles, he suspected that hers had changed the most over the past century. No longer did she employ the simple, straightforward, yet often effective techniques she had in the past. Clearly, her time training with
Zed and Shibuya had taught her patience and cunning.
It was something he was still learning, as Shibuya had pointed out to him more than six years ago.

“Oh, Takehiro knows better than to interfere with Sakura’s love life. Especially now that Eden fell. Personally, I think it would be a good thing for Sakura to live a little - she’s too serious, just like her father. She needs to unwind. Maybe a good lover or two would help her to relax.”

Rei launched forward, lighting his off hand with his blue flame. The thought of Sakura with anyone who wasn’t him snapped his tightly wound control, and there was no more concern about his battle finesse. With a devastating array of moves that would have killed or crippled a lesser opponent, Rei pushed Sakurako back, his rage mounting with every blow. Yet it wasn’t until her back was to the wall and their blades locked together that he realized what he had done, and the soft smile on her face - utterly at odds with their position - only drove it home. Once again, he had been manipulated by his feelings for Sakura. Would there ever come a day when she didn’t directly or indirectly affect his every action?

Probably not in this lifetime, and Rei was no longer strong enough to wish otherwise.

Sakurako’s sharp eyes flicked over his face, even as she adjusted her grip to keep his blade from slicing her clean through. “You’ve grown so strong, Rei. None of us could have imagined that you’d someday come this far. Challenging the Founders, overthrowing Eden, changing the very way of our lives. Even the King of All Heaven couldn’t have done what you did - neither could Code:Emperor Kyo. He was wrong about you, Rei. We all were.”

“Not everyone was wrong about me,” Rei hissed through his teeth, yet clamped them together before he could finish. Not Sakura.

A look of surprise settled over Sakurako’s face before she pulsed with a bright light, forcing Rei to throw himself back and swathe himself in hell flame. He readied himself for an attack even before the light had cleared, but when the pulse dissipated Sakurako made no move but to sheathe her sword. Rei relaxed minutely, releasing his hold on his flame. He did not relax his stance, however, not when the mother of the woman he was not-so-secretly in love with was looking at him with such a complicated expression on her face.

“Perhaps...we should be thanking my daughter, then, if all it took to fuel your greatness was her belief in you.”

Rei swallowed, and wondered if Sakura had inherited her ability to read him with unerring accuracy from her mother. To admit to it went against his every grain, yet to lie would be to undermine all Sakura had done for him. Therefore he hardened his expression before replying as obliquely as he was up to. “If you want. I thank her every day.”

“Do you?” Her eyebrow raised and Rei had a feeling this was her way of taking a break. The sparring never really stopped with her. “Is that what you’ve been doing the past six years?”

There was no reason to deny it. “Yes.”

Her other eyebrow raised to match. “You know, she might appreciate a more...personal form of thanks. Something more hands on. Or at least vocal. From someone she can respond to...or at least see.”

Rei shook his head decisively. “You know why I’m doing this. I mean no disrespect, but it’s the reason your marriage to Shibuya ended, and-”
Instead of taking offense like he thought she might, Sakurako chuckled. “Prime Minister Fujiwara and his regime were the reasons that my marriage ended, Rei. And by the time he was no longer a factor, Takehiro and I had made different choices. This is not the case for you and Sakura.”

This conversation was one hundred times worse than the one with Toki, largely as he hadn’t been able to win that one, and Sakurako had far more right to counsel him than Toki ever would. Also because she was Sakura’s mother. “And the fact that your daughter and I caused December 32nd to happen? There is no guarantee that we won’t spark another catastrophic negation ever again.”

“Well as long as you steer away from the bedroom blood-play—”

“I’m serious, Sakurako-san.”

“So am I, Rei. Yes, together the two of you caused the biggest negation this world has ever known. Yet you also shook the foundations of our world, and fashioned a new one. Today we’re all free because of the two of you. No one begrudges you your love, and neither would they take that away from you. And even if someone did and tried - the two of you would be strong enough to defeat them. That is what I believe, at least.”

For a moment all Rei could do was stare while visions of her words danced before his eyes. The pain of having to force those phantoms away made him more honest than he would have chosen to be, normally. “I’m not worthy.”

Sakurako hesitated, as if sure there was more coming. When nothing else did, her brows furrowed. “With all that you’ve done, Rei, you’ve proven yourself—”

“It is because of all that I’ve done. All the pain and devastation I’ve caused...the 147 deaths...none of that can be undone without a lifetime of atonement. I can’t simply choose to let go and move on and be happy. Then I would be no better than - than Prime Minister Fujiwara.”

Sakurako took a step closer to him, her voice dropping just as Shibuya’s did when they touched upon something serious. “Rei, what you were made to do as a child and adolescent cannot force your hand as an adult. Now that you have the luxury of choice, we all know the calibre of man you truly are.” She hesitated before continuing. “Besides, the amends you make are only for yourself, they are for no one else. Is that not as selfish as being happy?”

Rei remembered his dream the night before this whole mess began. Teetering at the edge of the abyss, his victims crowding in and the cross at his back - he had not felt selfish then. He had only felt selfish upon waking and wishing he had dreamed of Sakura. “Selfish or no, it is what I deserve, Sakurako-san.”

She sighed and ground her heel into the floor, almost as if she were crushing out an imaginary cigarette. Then she glanced towards the far wall with the hidden door that lead to the sparring area that the others were in. She glanced back at Rei with a hard expression, and he suspected she had come to an uncomfortable decision. “I know about the cross you carry, Rei. And I also know just how it feels to know without a shadow of a doubt that you alone deserve to bear it.” At the minute change in his expression she continued. “How could I not? I’ve killed far, far more than you ever will, Rei. Yet what haunts me more is this: I’m the wife who gave up her husband to protect their child, and the mother who allowed Eden access to that same child. I’m the Founder who gave up her strength to protect her best friend, and the woman who demanded more from him when it was not wholly his to give. I know what it is that you suffer, Rei. That being said, I know a truth of it that you do not.
“The crosses that we carry - they stay with us our entire lives. We do not set them down or forget about them. Yet they do not need to direct our lives. They are simply there, just as are our morals, our emotions, our hopes, and our dreams. And they are not always meant to be carried alone.”

“Mine is. These are my sins-”

“They do not need to direct our lives. They are simply there, just as are our morals, our emotions, our hopes, and our dreams. And they are not always meant to be carried alone.”

“Then think of it this way. Sometimes it is not about earning our forgiveness. Perhaps it is choosing to forgive ourselves.”

Rei sucked in a deep breath, and desperately quashed the burgeoning hope within him, fluttering against his insides like butterfly wings. It was more difficult than it should be when there was a chance to be with Sakura on one hand, and continuing his current existence on the other. False memories of their dream child swirled up, clouding his mind with their rich, heady vividness. He had to close his eyes to banish both them and this terrible, newfound hope.

Sakurako watched him closely out of the corner of her eye. “Something to think about, kiddo. Just remember. She’s not going to be here forever, and neither are you. Making your life a hell on earth when you’re so sure that’s what awaits you after death is kind of overkill, don’t you think?”

Rei swallowed, hoping she wouldn’t notice his adam’s apple bobbing. “It’s still my choice to make.”

“As are my daughter’s feelings for you. At least, as long as you stay away from her. Displaying your jealousy so obviously won’t help her give you up any faster, you know.”

Rei fought down a cringe with more success than he had fought down the frisson of hope. He knew attacking Yuuki had been a bad idea, but Yuuki had kissed her. In front of him. That was beyond unacceptable, and while Rei told himself that he was perfectly fine for Sakura to choose someone normal and outside of their blood-soaked world, he could not stand by and watch her choose another power user. Especially one who had known them, and whom Rei would have no real trouble killing, if it came down to it.

“It was a momentary oversight,” he informed her gravely. “Besides, Toki was probably the one who put him up to it. I won’t let the two of them hurt Sakurakouji-san with their jokes. As I already said, neither will Shibuya. But you have a point. I will endeavor to keep a more effective distance from your daughter from now on.”

He shifted, planning to go on the offensive. Sakurakouji read his intent and thumbed her katana. Unable to let him get the last word in, she smirked just before his charge.

“As long as that’s what you choose, Rei. Just understand that someday she’s going to make a choice of her own.”

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…the phone in her hand stopped ringing and a familiar voice picked up.

Upstairs in the kitchen, Sakura sneezed. She wiped her nose against her sleeve just as the phone in her hand stopped ringing and a familiar voice picked up.
“Hello?”

Although the response is somewhat strained Sakura beamed, not caring that no one could see it. While she had called Ai’s cell phone, she had been prepared for either Ai or Mishiru to answer the phone, knowing that the message would be relayed either way. “Good afternoon, Mishiru! I hope you are having a pleasant day. Do you or Ai have a few minutes to talk?”

“Ahh. Hold on for just a moment.” Mishiru cut away, and there is a muffled sound that Sakura can’t quite make out. It sounded like Ai and hold on and good boy, but that last doesn’t quite make sense so she admitted that she may be wrong. Then Mishiru was back on the line. “Hello, Sakura. We’re doing well, thank you. Um, is this a rare kind call? Ai is...well, he’s...a little busy with something, but should be done...soon.”

Sakura cocked her head to the side. Although Mishiru was naturally quite shy, there was an odd, charged hesitance as she spoke about lover. Perhaps he was in the bathroom? Yet that was no reason to be embarrassed, surely. “Oh, no. I just needed one of you. It’s about...well, it’s about Pandora’s Box. But there’s no immediate danger, and we can get into it later. There’s a few things the Code:Breakers need to take care of first. What I need to know is if you and Ai would be available to help us out with something when we’re done?”

There was a moment of silence of the line before a noise in the background - it sounded suspiciously like a male moaning in either pain or pleasure - filters through. Sakura, with her slowly fading naivete, chose to ignore it.

When Mishiru responded she sounded a bit frazzled, and Sakura steadfastly did not wonder why. “Will you need us to fight?”

“No, no. The fighting should be all done by the time we need you two.”

There was a shorter pause, but now Mishiru sounded relieved. “Of course, Sakura. Just let us know when you need us.”

There was another choked off groan, and Sakura shifts uneasily. Was it always so warm in the kitchen? Clearly she needed to go outside for a bit and enjoy the cool Autumnal air. “Excellent! I’ll let you know when everything is ready.” And then, because six years of college had taught her how to make a naughty joke or two, “Take care, and um. Enjoy yourselves!”

Mishiru may or may not have squeaked in embarrassment, but seeing as how Sakura was 90% sure she was also (currently) enjoying mad sexy times with Ai, Sakura felt no guilt. She was nothing but happy for them, after all, especially since she had had a few years to get over the lingering jealousy that they could have what she and Ogami could not. But she could not blame their happiness for Ogami’s choices, no matter how little she personally agreed with them.

But all that was not her mission: she had to figure out a way to draw the remnants of Pandora’s Box - or what powered it - out of the four of them, or at the very least render it incapable of activating ever again. Otherwise, the upcoming battles would be only a way of prolonging the inevitable. Besides, she felt personally responsible for the destruction her box had caused, even if she wasn’t technically the instigator. She had to be the one to figure out the way to unmake it, or better yet find a way for the box to never be replicated.

Sakura bent her head to the paper in front of her, and thought.
Happy May Day/Beltane/Friday! To celebrate, here’s an update. Please forgive me for falling into other fandoms (hnnng Supernatural and Hannibal stoppppp) and reading the shit out of everything for a month solid, because there will be more updates soon(ish. Let’s not get too carried away, here.)

Go find a pole, everyone. It’s time to dance!

Next chapter - Karin learns many things she would rather have not, Kouji makes a difficult decision, and Yuuki comes home.
The king’s proclamation echoed through the air and the hall erupted with a tumultuous wave of sound. Kouji was no doubt straining his ability to make out individual thoughts and opinions, checking to see if anyone was foolish enough to openly air any seditious sentiments. Yet all Karin could focus on was the man next to her, whose body had gone rigid as a plank as soon as his younger brother had taken the stage. Even though she had her reservations about Fujiwara Souri, her heart ached for the pain that the field marshal must be experiencing - for even though he distrusted his little brother, surely he must love him as well.

She glanced to Takehiro, who slowly shook his head as he looked back at her. His grim expression reminded her of the greater fear: they would undoubtedly be sent out into the field to face the dragon. Yet surrounded by the entirety of the king’s army, they would both be hard pressed to assist Kouji with the entirety of their powers. And this was a wind dragon - who was to say its very presence wouldn’t negate or render useless her and Kouji’s hold over wind?

Closer to home, there was still the matter of Hikari’s Box to consider: if Sakurako had been unsuccessful, they would have to construct and execute another plan before they left in the morning. They had to spend the remaining time they had left wisely; so even though no part of her wanted to leave him, they needed to leave the field marshal to his family affairs and make a plan. Karin caught Takehiro’s eye and then glanced tellingly to the double doors, and after he glanced behind her back at Kouji he nodded slowly. Taking pity on her he turned to Fujiwara, leaving her to break Kouji’s concentration so they could find a quiet corner and plan a hasty war council.

Yet when she turned to drag her cousin from the room she found Kouji flanked by guards, including two of Hikari’s private force. The suddenness of it made her heart skip a beat. One of Hikari’s guards took a step towards her, his face unreadable. Karin was hit with a terrible thought - had Sakurako been apprehended? Had she told them of their plan to steal the box?

But the king had commanded them to! Why were they being taken in then?

From her left she could smell the familiar, welcoming scent of sandalwood and some eastern spice,
and then warm waves of relief and muted affection rolled through her as the field marshal stepped up right next to her, close enough for their arms to press together. Karin swallowed. This, in conjunction with what she thought she had felt earlier...no, this was neither the time or place. Regardless, she must be wrong about what she had sensed. But oh, when she had a moment free, she was going to remember that moment for years to come, and wish it signified what for one heart-stopping moment she wanted it to...

“What word from the king, gentlemen?” The field marshal intoned gravely, voice clear and firm. It was as if the events of the past hour had not occurred - his brother not a branded traitor, the king not raving like a madman, another dreaded enemy not risen in the north. One guard’s attention flicked over to him and the judgement in his gaze set Karin’s blood to boiling. Everyone who knew the field marshal knew he was not cut from the same cloth as his brother - so how dare this guard assume otherwise? Even if he were he was the leader of the entire army, so how could a lowly soldier show him any level of disrespect?

The slightly more circumspect guard at his side straightened before passing along his message, although he did not meet their eyes either. “The king requests your presence, Field Marshal, as well as that of - of Lady Shihoin.” His stumble over her title was small, but noticeable. Karin was too upset to pay it much mind at the moment, knowing that among the army only a few of the men in Fujiwara’s troops were used to her, and the concept of a foreign noblewoman was nearly impossible to accept without her personally winning their grudging respect. No, she was far more concerned about the king’s asking for her directly, without calling for Kouji as well. Especially since the last time she had spoken with the king had been on her initial interview with him, over a year ago.

This could be dangerous. Kouji had told her the rumors of the king’s ability to know things - how, no one could say, but it was undeniable that he had held his position for so long because of his uncanny and unerring ability to discern otherwise unaccessible secrets. They had played a dangerous game in coming here, exposing her and her power over blood to him. Yet the king had also treated her with the utmost respect, and even a sort of removed fondness, as if a reflection of Hikari’s own true affection for her. If he knew about her secret, he wouldn’t have waited this long to punish her for it. There was a good chance this was about something else....but what else could it be? It couldn’t have anything to do with the Fujiwara family, could it?

For one fleeting, panic-stricken moment Karin worried that even the king might know of her feelings for her superior. Yet to call her on it would be even less likely than his having discovered her blood powers, and she hastily shoved it aside.

This was not the time for fear or insecurity. It was time to be bold. “Lead us to him, then,” she said, ignoring Kouji’s flare of concern and a sharp finger at her back. Takehiro was facing away, keeping his face in profile: staying out of the soldier’s attention, but not out of poking range, apparently. “There is much we must accomplish before we set out in the morning, after all.”

The nicer guard nodded briefly, while the other one simply sneered. Yet as they turned Karin whispered quietly on the wind, facing Kouji so that he knew to listen for her. “Find the children and the box. Let me know as soon as you have word. If things go badly...take our rare friend and get out.”

She strode past her cousin before she could see the effect of her warning on his face. The field marshal glanced over at her, an odd expression on his face. He had undoubtedly watched her lips move - but if he had not realized she and her cousin had secret ways of communicating, she did not begrudge him the knowledge now. She met his look with equanimity, pausing a bare moment before they reached the double doors where their escort waited. Had there been time, she would
have assured him of her belief in him, and that she knew his brother’s fall from grace in no way reflected him. Yet there was no time or opportunity. There was just a moment of connection - *and a faint increase in either her heartbeat or his, it was so hard to tell when her mind was spinning with her fears and regrets and frenzied escape plans* - before they reached the guards.

“This way.”

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There was a moment of panic as Karin blew past him, her last warning ringing in his ears. Her being called upon by the king had been his fear since bringing her here, and now that it had happened Kouji could only imagine it was in response to her blood powers. It had been an impossible dream to keep her ability from King Matsuhiro, and the only reason they had gotten this far was because she had spent the majority of her time here out in the field, away from his purview. Yet Kouji should have known better than to risk it. If the king killed her Kouji would never forgive himself. And it was a frighteningly real possibility - in the king’s current state, who was to say what he’d do, no matter how much Hikari loved her?

And here was a new, creeping fear: had Hikari been the one to tell him of her taboo ability? She had forced herself into Karin’s mind that once - perhaps Karin had underestimated her sister’s strength and subtlety? Was that why Karin had taken the time to warn him about Takehiro?

There were simply too many variables, and they had to make a plan *now*.

“Kouji,” Takehiro hissed. “*What the hell was that?*”

Kouji’s lips thinned. His last hope had been that Takehiro might know something he did not. Now that that was dashed, all he could hope for was that his first guess was wrong, and that something had happened to Hikari. But then why wouldn’t he be called as well? Hadn’t he proved his loyalty? “I’m not sure. Takehiro...this probably isn’t good.”

The rare kind’s expression matched his, although he kept his head down and his eyes kept flickering around the room, alert for a nobleman to come and accost Kouji. He *was* the hero of the realm after all. “No, I should say *not*. What do we do? How do we get her out?”

Takehiro was ever practical, and it was dangerous for him to stay here and garner any more attention, especially as he was also dependent on the field marshal, and they were unsure about the king’s intention for the elder Fujiwara. Kouji hummed distractedly, thinking quickly. “She asked me to go check on the children - see if my youngest cousin completed her mission. If something goes wrong...she’ll let me know.” He winced. “We’d probably know anyway. But if she’s discovered...I’ll likely share her fate for hiding this.” He glanced over at Takehiro, his expression hardening. “If anything happens to her, I’m taking you and running. This is *it*, my comrade. Dragon or no, we cannot let her sacrifice be in vain.”

The rare kind swallowed, pausing momentarily in his vigilance. He glanced at the door before looking down at his hands. “And if we’re wrong?”
“Then I will be a happy man.”

“But how will I know? I can’t stay with you, and I’m not connected the way you two are!”

An idea blossomed, but it was a dangerous one. He would have to leave it up to Takehiro. “You know the hidden passageways,” he said, voice dropping to a whisper. “You could watch over her. As long as you don’t put yourself in danger as well. Or try anything suicidal. But it’s only a suggestion, it’s just as dangerous for you as it is for her; we don’t know how the king knows these things. But if you want—”

“We will find you when they’re done.” Takehiro had barely finished speaking before he took off, slicing through the thinning crowds and slipping through a servant’s door so quickly Kouji could barely track him. His optimism and enthusiasm brought a faint smile to Kouji’s face. No matter the storm they were poised at the edge of, he and Karin had a true, loyal, steadfast friend to help them weather it. For all his reluctance, Kouji couldn’t imagine leaving Takehiro behind when all this was over.

And if despite the rare kind’s best efforts Karin did not survive her encounter with the king, he was fairly sure he wouldn’t give Takehiro a choice.

Kouji shook his head. That was something he’d worry about later. He needed to restrict himself to immediacy, keeping to tasks that would keep him from despair. He had to focus on what he could do. This meant finding those children, and making sure they had the box. Anything else would follow after.

Kouji made his way from the chamber, ducking past a never ending stream of worried nobleman, rushing soldiers, and flustered servants. He moved quickly and purposefully, deflecting questions and hails with a self-important air. He had learned early on that to do so often allowed him a certain freedom of movement, as well as opening up the quickest path to his destination. When he moved like this - backed by his reputation as the hero of the realm - no one sought to detain him long.

In this way he reached Kyo’s chambers barely 10 minutes later. Speed was the key, now. Whether or not the children had the box, if the king turned on Karin, he and Takehiro needed to get out of the country before either of them could be apprehended; at least well out of the kingdom by morning. It would take longer to reach the mainland, of course, but with the country in turmoil over the dragon Asura rising, he thought they would be able to make a clean getaway as long as they moved fast enough at the outset.

And if their paranoia was for naught, then they would have to clear up the mess with Hikari and her box by morning before they were sent out with the troops. All depended on Karin’s meeting with the king. Yet the box was another important aspect of their predicament. Hoping that his cousin had been able to procure it, Kouji strode into Kyo’s chambers, looking neither left or right to in case anyone was watching. It wouldn’t do to act suspiciously now, before all the cards had been laid upon the table.

His hopes fell as soon as his eyes fell upon the occupants of the room. Sakurako lay pale and still upon Kyo’s bed. Pacing the room with naked blade in hand was Zed, who by his murderous expression, looked fit to visit his wrath upon the palace. Hikari’s box was nowhere to be seen.

The boy’s initial reaction was surprise, but he recovered quickly. “Shihoin Kouji - did Kyo send you?” Zed strode toward him, blade dangling from his hand, almost as if he’d forgotten he was holding it. “Or the foreigner? She was supposed to meet with Sakurako, not leave her to die.”

As Kouji could feel her little puffs of air on every exhale, he knew that Zed was exaggerating.
Still, the girl was clearly far from well, and he understood the boy’s fear. “Karin was detained by the king. I’ve come in her place. But what happened? Was she attacked? Did Hi- the queen discover her?” To keep himself from imagining Hikari attacking an innocent girl he gruffly pushed on. “Don’t point that sword at me unless you intend to use it, boy - and there’s no time for that. Sit down and tell me what the hell is going on!”

All of Zed’s bluster drained out of him in a rush, and he collapsed into the chair across the room from Sakurako’s bed. He laid the sword gently across his legs, and looked mournfully at his best friend in the bed. Then, haltingly, he began to explain.

“For what she told me, she and the foreigner switched - Sakurako went to go get the box ‘cuz she was smaller and fit through the tunnel better, and also because she wanted to be a big damn hero. But then there was something funny with the tunnel - shapes on the wall, or something? Rako was a little out of it, but she was really...determined about that part. Anyway she got to the box and it was glued to the floor somehow. She couldn’t lift it so she used her power on it, thinking she’d get it to move along with her...and then it exploded. She said there was light everywhere and it sent her flying and then she knocked her head on the ceiling.”

He took a deep breath, twisting his fingers together. “I could...feel it when she passed out, but because of that it took me forever to find her...and even then, I only managed it because she landed a couple feet away from the box, so I could faintly feel her through the wall. When I got close to it I could barely feel her at all. It almost felt like the box was sucking out her power or something. I don’t know. It was bad, though. Bad like demons. I remember how they felt,” his whispered, voice cracking as he looked up at Kouji with wide eyes. “I remember them from when they destroyed my village. It felt like that, sir. Almost like the box was alive.”

When Kouji said nothing, needing a moment to collect his thoughts, Zed sighed and kept going. “I carried her out of the tunnel but I couldn’t take her any further - she’s too sick, and my powers were just making it worse. I got a couple servants to help carry her and leave her here, and one of them came back with some medicine to drink. She’s better, but not a whole lot.” He tore his gaze from her to Kouji. “What is that thing? How could it do that? Was it the queen’s magic? It is her box, right?”

Kouji shook his head slowly. “We’re not sure, Zed. Hikari’s power is nothing like what you’ve described…but nothing like this happened until we brought the box here.”

“Well then why did we have to steal it back? If it was harmless before and bad now, isn’t it because of her?” The boy was practically snarling with rage and fear, and Kouji grimaced. That the children were powerful he well knew, but neither of them had the disciplined training that would keep them from wild guessing and the impulsive behavior that so often followed.

In an effort to make him think, Kouji spoke to him like he would an equal. “Calm yourself, soldier. We must think clearly, or move not at all. There is more here that you do not know: the king himself fears an inherent evil in the box - it could be something as simple as a woman’s touch to trigger it. Perhaps it is something more than that. What I can assure you as the queen’s cousin is that she did not intentionally engineer Sakurako’s injury. From her current state...I’d guess she had no idea Sakurako was going after the box at all.”

Zed frowned, yet he breathed deeply, obviously striving for calm. “But she’s the poisoner, isn’t she? That was her side of the bargain with Fujiwara in the greenhouse, wasn’t it? Who’s to say this isn’t somehow connected?”

“And who is to say it is? If they are, the king will know shortly, as he publically arrested Fujiwara Souri just this morning.”
Zed’s sighed dramatically, forcing out an angry breath in a rush. “Then I don’t get it! Who is the bad guy here? And what are we supposed to do about that damned box?”

“Zed?” The voice drifted pale and listless from the bed. His outburst had woken Sakurako, and even in that hazy stage between sleeping and waking she was concerned for him. “Zed, what’s wrong? Are you ok?”

Zed jumped up, nearly dislodging the sword before he remembered what his power would have on her state and slowly sat back down. In recompense he fixed her the brightest smile he could manage. “Good morning, Rako. I’m fine. How are you feeling?”

She groaned. “Like I just went three rounds of hand-to-hand combat with Kyo. I am never, ever…” She trailed off when she noticed her cousin standing by the door. “Cousin! What are you doing here?” She remembered her failure and winced. “You’re here instead of Karin, right? For the box? Did Zed tell you what happened?” She looked down. “I’m sorry. I failed.”

Kouji shook his head. “Do not apologize. We were mislead as to the true nature of the box, as well as the damage it could cause. Not one of us could have gone as far as you could, I am sure. It does mean our plans have changed, however.”

Both teens looked up at him, with identical expressions of rapt attention. Gods above, had he ever been so young and trusting? Surely he was a terrible influence on young minds...why did they trust him so openly? Perhaps they simply had few options in such a tumultuous time.

“The two of you must abandon the box. The political situation here is precarious, and once again the safety of the realm has been threatened. The army moves out in the morning to face another dragon, and the palace is besieged by betrayal within. And, as Zed has pointed out, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell who is an enemy and who is a friend. Leave the box to...myself and another associate. We will handle this, or we will get the king to.”

The two youngsters shot each other a look, but Zed cut Sakurako off before she could begin to argue. “No, Rako. We’re doing what he says. You need to get better before anything else happens...especially if we’re still at war!”

“But-”

“Buts!”

“Zed!”

“I said no, Rako-” As the children argued the sword was suddenly swathed in a cloying black smoke, seeping and twining over the steel. Kouji had only seen the manifestation of the boy’s power a handful of times, largely as the boy liked to keep his power over death as unobtrusive as he could. He took an instinctive step back, out of the reach of the cold, dark tendrils.

On the bed Sakurako snorted, although it was still weak. “Fine. We are not arguing this now. Especially if it distracts you from making your death sword.”

That caught Kouji’s attention. “Death sword?”

Zed scowled. “I’m not losing control, Rako.” He turned back to Kouji and explained. “Usually, Rako and I balance each other out, right? We even tend to lose our power at the same time. But on the occasions where only one of us is sick or wounded, the other person has to channel their power into something, so we don’t overwhelm each other or someone else. Rako likes to do it to dolls, ‘cuz then they can dance around and talk and then she can make up stories with them and stuff-”
“Zed,” she hissed, with eyes that promised divine vengeance. “That is not true. I have never done that. Do not listen to him, Kouji.”

“...Right. And I like to do it to knives or other weapons, ‘cuz Rako gets mad when her dolls look like they are possessed by demons—”

“Stop talking about the dolls, Zed!”

“Even though we always fix them afterwards. I mean, it gets kind of scary when the dolls walk and talk or are swathed in darkness, and it’s impossible to use the knife when it’s powered up. But it’s a good temporary measure. Rako thought of it.”

Kouji glanced over at Sakurako, who was sitting up on the bed, her cheeks blazing with color and her fists clenched. Zed looked less apologetic than Kouji would have suspected, but if he’d been trying to needle her into showing a spark of life, he had succeeded. “That’s...very ingenious.” It was borderline brilliant, actually, and he eyed the dark blade on Zed’s lap speculatively.

“Interesting. Have you ever not fixed something at the end? Do you know how long the blade...or doll might hold onto the remnants of your power?”

The two friends shared another look and Kouji fought down a burst of hope. “Well…”

Sakurako’s cheeks were scarlet, but her voice was strong as she interrupted her friend. “The longest we’ve gone is about 3 months. Then Mom found the d-doll and got really angry. Even though we weren’t doing anything weird to it, it was just our friend, and we didn’t make her fight at all, and even Zed was really kind to her, and—”

“And those were imbued with your power, yes? What about your knives, Zed?”

His eyes widened and then narrowed as he saw the line of Kouji’s thoughts. “It’ll last forever, far as we know. But no one else can use it. Otherwise I’d just give you the sword.”

“Why can’t others use it?”

“Because my power is over death, sir,” Zed said with a frown. “And I know you’re powerful, and might even survive using it in battle directly, but you’d have to carry it there, and being near it would slowly kill you. You wouldn’t even make it to the battle, in all likelihood.”

Kouji closed his eyes and considered. He didn’t doubt the boy’s knowledge of his powers, and there were countless reasons why death had been a taboo power long before the rise of the demons. Yet a weapon that was infused with death was an unlooked for boon, currently his best plan to kill the dragon. If he could only figure out a way to survive using it - survive carrying it, first - then he could truly claim to have slain a dragon. And the greatest and most terrible of them all, at that!

Perhaps Takehiro could carry it without diminishing or outright negating its power? If he could do that he could even wield it, although Kouji thought he would refuse. Taking a stand against such a high profile dragon would be something he’d shy away from, especially if he had to make the killing blow. Only in the most desperate of circumstances would he step in so obviously, and it was something they couldn’t rely on. Besides, there was a much higher probability that his touch would render the blade ordinary, rendering his participation moot.

So what could he do? He had to think quickly, and make a decision before Karin - oh. *Karin.* He hadn’t told her of the box’s outcome!

“Excuse me for just a moment,” he told the children who were still bickering about something or other. Neither of them glanced at him as he stepped out of the room and into the bustling confusion.
outside. He stood stock still against the tide of people, and then took a moment more to center himself before he sent out a message on the wind. Yet a cry and a sharp flash of white light that burned through his turned back and shut eyelids roused him from his focus. He spun and raced back into the room, expecting an attack, or at the least some sign of a struggle-

-but the tableau was as before, with Sakurako lying back on the bed, Zed at her side, both fists clenched around the hilt of the blade.

“Gods damn it all, Rako! Are you trying to kill yourself?”

Her reply and smile were weak imitations of her usual vigour. “Had...to help, Zed. You can’t...be only hero.”

“What is she talking about?” It must have been her massive expenditure of power...and from the looks of her now, it had been her last reserves. Pushing oneself like this lead to a terrible death, wherein the power turned upon the user and destroyed them. When well moderated such a thing was rare, but if the girl didn’t watch herself…

“Fixed...sheath. Can hold Zed’s...” Sakurako passed out mid word, and Zed groaned in worry before taking a few steps away from her. That left Kouji to pluck the sheath from the blanket, looking over it quizzically.

Zed glanced back over his shoulder, nervously rubbing his fingers together. “It’s probably just as bad to hold only that. Keep them together always, even in battle. Having both the sheath and the sword will probably negate some of the sword’s effectiveness, but it was also keep it from killing you. And I don’t know if there will be any area effects, so try not to use it around a lot of people. Only use it on the dragon. And don’t tell anybody where you got it. And-”

“I understand,” Kouji interrupted, holding out the sheath. “I will be exceedingly careful. It will only be wielded against Asura, and my comrades and I will keep it secret and safe.” The boy slid the sword home, and Kouji spun the sheathed blade once, testing its heft. Then he slid it into his belt and bowed in thanks. “Thank you. Thanks to the both of you, we have a chance of saving the kingdom.”

Zed raised an eyebrow. “From the dragon at least. What are we supposed to do about Fujiwara and the queen?

“For your safety in particular, I would stay as far away as you can. If it were a safer time, I’d recommend traveling back home. As it is...well. What does the heir say?”

Zed winced. “Kyo’s gone. He took his son to a safe place so that the queen wouldn’t hurt him. We tried to tell him that she wouldn’t hurt Soutarou, but he didn’t listen. All he told us to do was to stay together and use our heads...and not die before we faced him for real.” Zed smiled crookedly. “He’s got kind of a one track mind, doesn’t he?”

That was putting it mildly. Kyo had the reputation of drifting through life with deadly grace and precision, with no rhyme or reason to what he might passionately defend or destroy. His child was the exception to the rule, yet even then he had kept the boy’s existence a secret for nearly a decade. But on all accounts he was an excellent judge of character, so if Kyo trusted the children to handle themselves well during a crisis, Kouji could do nothing less.

Yet he couldn’t just leave them with no options. “I understand. I’m sorry, but I must go. Do as Kyo says, and stay as safe as you can. If things go badly, know that the both of you always have a place with me and Karin. Even if it means leaving the kingdom, my comrades. I will send word of my
plans in the morning - you don’t have to accept, just know that it is an option. In the meanwhile, stay safe. Will Sakurako need a healer?”

Zed shook his head. “They left us the tincture of her medicine, and more herbs to make tea. That was all they could do the first time, and I can handle that.” He bowed once. “Thank you, sir. And I’ll let Sakurako know about your offer when she wakes up. I don’t know what we’ll decide, but it means a lot to us that you offered.” He smiled, and Kouji was surprised to see such light on the master of death’s face. “We’ll wait for word from either you or your foreign cousin, and no matter what we decide we’ll let you know.”

Kouji nodded and turned to go before one last thought occurred to him. “There is one other you should know of - if you meet a man named Shibuya Takehiro, you may trust him. He is our friend and partner, and will be coming with us wherever we go when the war is over. No matter how...odd he may seem or feel, he is our closest friend and has our confidence. I doubt that your paths will cross, but stranger things have happened, I suppose. Now I really must go. Stay safe.”

“You too, sir.”

Kouji left the room, thinking it was a day of surprises. The morning had been dark and somewhat hopeless, yet now that he at least had a weapon in hand that would give him a chance against the dragon. Perhaps if he played his cards right, he could use this to barter for Karin’s safety?

These were desperate times, after all, and such times called for desperate measures.

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Chapter End Notes

So all of what I had originally planned for Ch 28 ended up being 10K+, so I split it into two. Bonus updates for the month of June! Something to look forward too :)Things are slowly ramping up in Takama ga hara...next chapter we have Karin learning what she’d rather not, and Yuuki coming home (!!), and against all odds, the moment you’ve all been waiting for. :D
YES IT IS EXACTLY WHAT YOU ARE THINKING.
Karin stood at attention on the other side of the king’s desk, and wondered if this was how her life was going to end. She was unsure if the field marshal’s absence - the king had merely glanced at him and assured him his brother would be alive when he returned before commanding him to assemble the army - was a blessing or one last regret to distract her in her final moments.

“I know exactly what you are, Shihoin Karin. Blood manipulation is a taboo power, and you dared enter my realm as such. You must have known the usual penalty for such arrogance.”

She swallowed. Well. That settled that.

The king fixed her with a dark, dangerous look, and goosepimples rose on her flesh. She opened her mouth to say something - apologize, explain, she wasn’t quite sure but she had to do something - but he interrupted her with an impatient hand gesture.

“I’ve known since you told me your father was dead. Since you told me Tokitou was your father. Close your mouth, girl. I don’t require explanation, nor apology, nor plea.”

Karin’s set her chin, determined to face her fate bravely. Still, she wondered if along with all the rest of his esoteric knowledge, the king could feel her heart pounding in anxiety.

“In a happier time I would be handling this very differently, girl. But our world is falling to pieces, and I need all the able warriors I can get to face this threat. Do you understand?”

Karin nodded slowly, forcing herself to breath slowly and evenly and to not break apart in her fear. “The dragon. I can fight the dragon with...with my other power.”

The king narrowed his eyes at her, staring at her for a long moment. Karin remembered what Kouji had told her upon arrival - to be a warrior first and foremost - and straightened her spine. “You could. But I have a different task for you.”

That coupled with his blatant dislike was not promising. “Your highness?” Karin asked tentatively, hoping this was not an elaborate death sentence, half afraid that the king would change his mind in his madness.
The King of All Earth sat abruptly, leaving Karin standing awkwardly. His face was lined with exhaustion, and for the first time since Karin had met him she could see the sorrow in his gaze. Somehow it made her even more nervous than had his dire proclamations as to her fate. “Little as I like it, I need you to stay at the palace, girl. You are the only one who can protect Hikari - the only one she’ll let near her, now. You visited her the other day. You know her condition. Had you expected her to be so far gone?”

Karin winced. “No, your highness. I had heard she was not well, but we hoped that when we managed to separate her from the box she might get better…”

The king shut his eyes. “Even you can’t get it from her now. I’d thought she might be convinced to give it to Kouji, but if even he has failed...perhaps if you had not fallen in battle you could have stolen it back, but it is too late now. Too much has been set into motion. I can no longer delay the inevitable.”

“The inevitable?”

He sighed, stretching his fingers out against the table. “Did your father ever tell you the origins of the box?”

Karin thought back. Her father had only mentioned it briefly, making her promise to deliver it to her older sister - his first masterpiece. Yet he had said something else once, hadn’t he? They’d been sitting at the kitchen table...in a flash, she remembered. “He said that you were there. When it was made. That the both of you…”

She trailed off, the memory slipping away from her. She had been young, and learning her letters. He had looked at her from across the table and said… “He called it his labor of love. I had thought that he’d meant that in terms of his first daughter, the sister I’d never known...but then he mentioned you. He said…”

Oh, what had he said. It was so long ago, and it had been nearly forgotten in all the years following... She had to remember. Remember how sad he had looked, remember how much it made her fear that he missed his home more than he loved her and her mother.... “It had been for you. The box? Or maybe it was his love, I don’t know, he didn’t specify. But he said...that it was all possible for you? Not for you. Because of you. And that it was why he’d taken it away as well.”

She looked back up, unable to recall any further, if there was anything left to recall. “But if he’d needed to do that then; if he saw an inkling of this danger then, why would he make me promise to bring it back to Hikari? He made sure I knew that. I had to give it to her - put it into her hands, myself.”

The king watched her with wide, glassy eyes, as if he were seeing into a past that she hadn’t known. Not for the first time, she wondered at the relationship between her father and the king. Her father had spoken of him now and again, always in the same calm tones he used of everyone. Yet he had chosen exile in the face of their friendship. Judging by the king’s expression now, there must be more to it than she had suspected. All at once, she knew it was connected to the box.

The damned box. Innocuous element of her childhood that it had been, she was willing to bet it was far more important than her father had ever let on… “It’s all connected to the box, isn’t it? I should never have brought it back. I should have left it home. It’s why Hikari went mad, isn’t it? And-”

“It is not the box itself. It is what it contains.”

The king’s quiet proclamation silenced her, although worry still vibrated inside her bones.
Exhausted as he was there was a danger to King Matsuihiro’s words that made her remember, not for the first time, that she was alone in his chambers, and that he was the master of hellflame. There was no Takehiro to save her this time. If he chose to go back on his word, her death would be beyond her ability to stave off. “Your highness?”

He stood abruptly, pacing the room before resting his hand gently on the windowpane. “This all happened before you were born, child. Before your father even dreamed of exile. I…” He turned to face her, and his expression made her blood run cold. “Swear to me, girl. Swear to me that you will tell this to no living person, in this life or the next.”

“But what if-”

“Swear, girl.”

Karin bit her lip to keep from blasting the rude king with a gust of wind. “Your highness, I will if you answer this: is this secret of yours more important than destroying the box? You wouldn’t be telling me this if it wasn’t necessary, and if if destroying the box could save Hikari, how could you entrust it only to me? The only one I would tell is Kouji. Beyond that, I can swear to tell no living soul.”

“You play a dangerous game girl, when the blood running through your veins is mine by rights.”

She tilted her chin up. She had grown used to her fear, and if she had to play such infantile games she’d almost rather face her demise. Her annoyance made her bold. Besides, no man owned her, king or not. “If you kill me, your highness, Hikari and Kouji will never forgive you. Who will love you then? Who will kill the dragon? What will you do without your wife and champion?”

The king took a step toward her, his hand wreathed in hellflame. Karin stood still, eyes narrowing. If this was her end, so be it. She had no come this far to be bullied by a king pushed beyond his bounds. He took another step, and her mouth moved without her planning.

“Do you send me to my father, then?”

He faltered then, the blue flame guttering out. The rage passed as quickly as it came, and Karin wondered at the power her father held over him, even in death.

“Only Kouji. And only if it is needed.”

Karin nodded, the adrenaline coursing through her making her a bit unsteady.

The king turned his back on her, walking back to his desk. A long, tense moment passed. When he finally spoke his voice was clipped and cold, outlining the facts in the sparsest form possible. “The soul of my first wife - Shouko - is in the box. Before she died she made a deal with a demon king to ensure the safe delivery of her child. Yet what she bore was no human child, and she died in the bearing of it. The child was destroyed, yet her soul was trapped in the balance - she lingered here as a ghost for some years. She grew ever more violent, and finally Tokitou made a box in which to trap her.

“He chose exile for his own reasons, but his safe passage was secured by his taking the box out of the kingdom. We thought that it might slow the demon attacks - whatever deal she made brought the demons into our land, yet at the beginning they were manageable, nothing like they are now. So he took the box and left, and she must have slept within it, peaceful and quiet until he died. It was the box that the demons were attracted to, I am sure of it. I am not sure why he told you to bring it back. Perhaps he thought the danger over. Or perhaps her whispers had reached even him.
“Yet the true danger was bringing it to Hikari. Tokitou must not have known his elder daughter had just become the queen. Your bringing it to her sealed her fate. I believe that Shouko has been influencing Hikari since she received the box, and now controls her utterly. Whether she is fully possessed or merely Shouko’s puppet makes no difference. It is the reason why Hikari has lost herself in this madness, and why she has stooped to murder.”

Karin gaped. The king knew? “Murder? Wait, that was...that was Hikari? No. Your highness, she would never choose-”

The king nodded abruptly. “In a sense you are correct. It was not Hikari’s choice, but Shouko’s - all of this is just Shouko’s punishment.”

Karin shook her head. “But to punish Hikari? Or to punish you? Those were your friends she targeted, your confidants!”

He grimaced. “She had just discovered something that hurt both her and your sister. I had long feared what Hikari would do when she discovered the truth about my progeny...I had not expected Shouko’s rage as well.” At Karin’s confused look he continued. “I have two sons, girl. Soutarou is not Kyo’s. He is mine. I can only imagine that discovering Soutarou existed was the final tipping point. Shouko resumed nearly full control over Hikari, and the demon attacks increased. Yet when that didn’t work to bring down the kingdom, she turned to poisoning several of my confidantes, and tried for Kyo as well. Yet she was foiled then, as well. And now-”

Karin’s head was spinning, filled with impossible fancies and facts. The box was filled by the demon-infected spirit of his dead wife? Yet how else could she explain her sister’s odd behavior? Bubbling out of this turmoil was the remembrance of the younger Fujiwara in chains. “But Fujiwara Souri - why was he arrested then?”

The king’s lip curled. “He was in league with her. His greed and ambition pushed him into making a deal with her, and he worked just as hard to bring the kingdom down...albeit in different, politically-based channels. I arrested him and appointed him scapegoat because now he can finally be useful. Through my journeys into Hell, I have learned that there is a way to free Hikari - and he is the key.”

“She can be saved? How...oh, by destroying the box, of course! But how can Fujiwara be useful?” She gasped as it came to her. “Because he’s not a power user. Does that mean he can get us the box?”

The king nodded slowly. “Not only that, but he can also open the box. If the box is opened we can destroy it...but it will also mean his destruction. No mortal man can open the box and live...but his sacrifice would save not only your sister, but the kingdom.”

“But...if what you say is true, then Fujiwara is innocent - at least in terms of the poisonings, and the demon war...”

“Innocence is a relative term, girl. He may not have made a deal with the demons like Shouko did, or murdered men like Hikari did, but his hands are not clean. He enabled Hikari, and other political dissidents before you came here. He is a man who deserves death. And in this way, he can serve the kingdom - and save your sister. Do you not love Hikari?”

Karin’s breath caught in her throat, raw and swollen with unshed tears. “I do.”

“And do you not love your father?”
Of course I do!”

“And would you have them die in vain, alone and despoiled by demons?”

“No, of course not!”

The king looked at her then, and his eyes burned, reflecting the light of his flame. “Then will you protect your sister, keeping her from harm until Fujiwara meets his fate?”

Karin closed her eyes as the first tear spilled past her eyelashes. She thought of her sister, bright-eyed and smiling all those months ago, combing her hair after the baths, telling her secrets and hugging her tightly. She thought of the dead queen she had never known, twisting her thoughts, perverting her heart. She remembered the younger Fujiwara on his knees before the king, and his whisper of decay at the roots.

And just before she opened her eyes and gave her answer, she remembered Maka, the little girl who had stolen into her mind to learn what a demon was, having seen them from both her father...and her uncle. This, oddly enough, made up her mind.

“I cannot agree with killing innocents, your highness, but I know that it is not my choice to make. What I can agree with is this: Hikari will be protected, from both herself and others, until she is saved. This I swear to you.”

The king watched her for a long, tense moment, and Karin was thankful for her swelling tears. With them, the king would think her weak. And more so, honest.

“Thank you, girl. You have made your father proud. Now go. Hikari will need you more than ever in the next coming days.”

“Yes, your highness.”

She bowed and then turned, struggling with the doorknob as she left. Her tears blurred her vision, leaving the empty hallway swimming before her eyes. She drew her sleeve across them, wiping them away as a child might. She had never felt this lost before, not even on the night her father died.

She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, struggling to master herself before she broke down completely. The sound of a sliding panel roused her, and when she opened her eyes she looked into a familiar, empathetic face.

For a long moment Takehiro said nothing, merely watched her as she swallowed thickly. Then he tilted his head towards the end of the hall and whispered, “We have to go, Red. We have to let Kouji know.”

Karin nodded, wiping her eyes once more. The realization that Takehiro had been listening in on her private talk with the king was more of a comfort than a surprise. What was equal parts comfort and surprise was how he gripped her hand as soon as she lowered it, squeezing it tightly as he lead her down the hallway.

The action shook her, and she found her voice. “He lied, Takehiro.”

“I know.”

“About Fujiwara Souri.”
“...I know.”

“But not about the boy. Soutarou.”

Takehiro sighed. “And your sister?”

Karin bit the inside of her cheek, focusing on the strength in Takehiro’s fingers to keep from crying again. “His first wife wouldn’t call me sister, or tell me that she loved me. And if my father knew that there was a woman’s soul in the box he would never have given it to me to bring home. So yes, Takehiro. I think he lied about her, too.”

“So he lied about her...and Fujiwara...”

“Neither of them had anything to do with the box. He lied about him to protect someone else...”

Fujiwara’s warning hung between them, like a death knell. Decay is deadliest when it begins at the root...Falsely accusing me with not save the kingdom.

Takehiro swore, and then glanced around. His voice never wavered from the quiet, stoic tone they had both adopted. “So it was him, then?”

She looked at him with red-rimmed eyes. “I think we’re in some trouble.”

“Red...” He trailed off, and guilt and worry played across his face. ‘Some trouble’ was an understatement. They had been in more than simply some trouble ever since they’d met - the rare kind and a taboo power user, and the man that hid their secrets. Now, their position was worse than ever - they were besieged by demons and dragons and lying kings, with no way to tell who was the greatest threat. Her sister’s life hung in the balance, with no way of knowing how to save her. And Fujiwara Souri hung like a spectre between them, and there was very little way of knowing how innocent he truly was.

They didn’t know what step to take, or what to do, or who to trust. Yet they had Kouji, and even to an extent Sakurako and Zed...and for the time being, each other. Takehiro must have realized some of this as well, for when he spoke there was the ghost of his usual insouciance. “That is putting it mildly. Frankly, this is too much excitement for me. You Shihoins are going to give me a heart attack.”

Faced with all the turmoil, Karin smiled. This, she knew. This was practically home. “Shut up, Takehiro. But thank you. Again.”

He squeezed her hand one more time. “Any time, Red.”

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finally Takehiro who asked, “So. What do we do?”

With a sinking heart, Kouji knew what must be done.

“Well, my role is clear enough,” Karin murmured, fiddling with the cuffless section of her ear. “I fulfill my promise to the king, and keep Hikari safe. And if I have the chance, I’m going to have a talk with Fujiwara. Maybe I can try and scare him into telling me how he’s seen the demons.”

Takehiro gave her a look at the thought of her attempting to torture anyone. “Red, he’s not going to be frightened of you.”

“Even if I manipulate his blood?”

Takehiro’s face took on an odd expression, like he knew something she didn’t. “Just...trust me. Fear isn’t what he feels for you. And if he knew you could do something like that, it would probably just be...worse.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kouji interrupted, feeling the weight of his decision weigh heavily on his shoulders. “Because Karin’s not going to stay at the palace.”

“What?”

“Kouji, I promised. And who else will protect Hikari?”

Kouji shook his head. “No. You’re not staying anywhere near the king, not when he’s broken our trust and expects us to act on false information. Lying to us could mean our lives; nearly cost Sakurako hers. You’re not staying here.”

Her first three words were in her native tongue, and she started again for Takehiro’s benefit. “Then are we leaving Hikari to die?”

Across from both of them, standing in the third point of their triangle, Takehiro gave both of them concerned looks. “Look, maybe we need to think quietly on this for a couple minutes…”

Kouji waved them both off. “No we are not, Karin. I will stay and protect her.”

Karin blinked at him in shock, and Takehiro’s expression was eerily similar.

“But the king-”

“But the dragon-”

He shook his head. “I am staying. Hikari’s condition is no one’s fault but her own. Not the king’s, not his first wife’s...and no matter what the king says, I’m the only one who can keep her from harm. I’m the better warrior, Karin. And more importantly, I’m ruthless enough to keep her from harming - whether intentionally or not - anyone else. Could you do that? You spoke of threatening Fujiwara...could you do the same to your sister?”

His cousin stared up at him with wide eyes, clearly arguing with herself. Her answer was given when she looked to the floor, chewing the inside of her lip.

“It is not a weakness, cousin. Your love for your sister-”

“Then I’m taking your place,” she interrupted. “I will fight Asura for you.”

Kouji blinked. “Are you mad? This is your chance to leave the kingdom. You won’t get another
opportunity like this, Karin.” He glanced over at Takehiro. “The same goes for you. This is the best chance either of you will have to escape all this.”

Takehiro and Karin glanced at each other, once again in perfect accord. Kouji should be used to it by now, but every time it still made him wonder how they did it. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s how it’s going to happen, comrade.” Takehiro found the levity to wink at him. “As soon as she leaves the palace she’s just going to do what she wants, so you might as well leave her to it.”

“And as for you?” Karin asked with a raised eyebrow, pushing when she saw Takehiro’s attempt at evasion. “No, no. The same goes for you - you’re going to do what you need to do. Just be honest with us about it. Are you going to come with me? Or are you going to escape?”

Kouji watched with interest. The three of them had been dancing around this subject for months, and yet this was the first time all three were discussing it openly. Takehiro looked from Karin to him, before staring into the middle distance. Both Shihoins could tell when he’d finally come to his decision, something in his posture seemed to relax.

“Well. Saying this makes me a bad, bad man, but...I’m going to go with Red. Help take down one more dragon, yeah? Besides, I’ve got to keep Hideyoshi from doing something stupid. You’d be surprised at what that man can do when left to his own devices- oof!”

He was interrupted by Karin throwing her arms around him and squeezing the life out of him. Thankfully for his ribcage the hug was brief. Then, she turned her sights onto Kouji. He suffered through her embrace manfully (there were drawbacks to her native strength and exuberance) and swallowed a grin when he saw Takehiro rub his sides.

He patted her head as she pulled away, ignoring Takehiro’s fond, yet vaguely mocking smile. “Thank you, Takehiro. I’d hug you as well, but I think we both need to recover first.”

“Hey.”

Kouji smiled at his cousin before continuing. “So that is our plan. I remain, the two of you go, and as soon as the dragon is killed, I need the two of you to wait someplace safe. Have Karin leave a code in her native tongue, with the field marshal preferably. I will meet up with you as soon as Hikari is stable.”

“And then what?” Karin asked without looking at Takehiro, as if she knew it would only be the two of them at the end. “We can’t go back, Kouji. We’ll have to go someplace new.”

“Well, actually…” Takehiro interrupted, trying to look nonchalant and failing. “We all could go to Japan.”

Kouji and Karin shared a look that was equal parts confusion and hope.

“Or more specifically, we could go to field marshal Fujiwara’s holdings, in Japan. You know, the house he lives in when he’s not in the kingdom? He bequeathed it to me. I’ve got the paperwork right here.”

“He left you his house?” Karin was stunned, and Kouji was surprised to see Takehiro’s guilty grin.

“He left you guys stuff too. Kouji, I left a sword for you in your chambers - he said something about the inscription being important? And uh, Maka wrote you a little story that he transcribed...I can give to you before we leave. He thought it might be a good thing to use when learning Japanese.”
Inexplicably, Karin’s eyes watered. Kouji frowned. Was she going to miss the child that much? On second thought he supposed it was natural. Some women were like that with children. Most, perhaps. And the girl had risked her life for Karin…

“Thank you,” Karin whispered. “I- I mean, I hope you thanked him for us.”

Once again, Takehiro’s smile was oddly pained. “Of course I did. But the holdings. We can escape there, and plan out the next stage.”

His meaning wasn’t lost on either Shihoin. “Wait, does that mean you’re coming with us?” Kouji half leaned across the table, and Karin looked no less excited.

He shrugged. “I told you it made me a bad, bad man. But there’s just something about you Shihoin. I just can’t let you go.” He fluttered his eyelashes dramatically. “So take me away. I want to see the world.”

Karin snorted while Kouji frowned. This was no time for jokes. Yet after thinking about it a moment, he too saw the need for humor in a time like this, and he decided to let it go. Rather than chastise him, he nodded firmly. “It’s settled then. Wherever we go, we go together. But first—”

*The world lurched sickeningly, the colors swirling together like the scene was a shaken snowglobe. Then—*

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The dream ended suddenly, jarringly. When Sakura came to herself she almost expected to find herself on the floor, or drained of color herself. Yet she opened her eyes to the exact same tableau she had closed them to, save for the dream maker whose strength had at least failed, currently sagging pale and gasping against Karin.

Next to her, her father kneeled to support Maka’s weight, and when he rose he shared a concerned glance with Karin. Yet Maka kept them from remarking on her obvious weakness.

“Don’t tend to me, I’m fine. The story was done for today anyway. The boy has returned.”

As if on cue there was a thump coming from the hallway, and everyone turned to the doorway where Yuuki staggered in. He was covered in blood, clothes torn, and his arm hung from an odd angle that signalled a dislocated shoulder. There was also an unsteadiness in his eyes; casting uselessly about the room, still looking for threats. Just as Toki rose to steady him, he tottered unsteadily several steps in the opposite direction, seeking out Ogami. When he reached him, he licked his split lower lip and tried to grin.

“Party time, guys. Demons are up and in business. I think I handled the first wave. Gonna’ sit this
next one out.” He wobbled and began to fall backwards. “Tag in, team.”

He was unconscious by the time Ogami and Toki caught him, only inches away from hitting the floor. Ogami laid him gently down, while Toki’s lips flattened. Ready or not, if the demons had materialized, then the war had begun once more.

After that, everything happened quickly.

Orders were given and weapons and supplies were packed. All present were warriors in some form or another, and most had solidified such plans within days of arrival. Sakura’s mission was to escort Yuuki and Maka to Eden’s hospital, one of the few institutions that had continued since Eden’s fall. Yet they would be dropped off by what Toki had dubbed Team Puppeteer - her father, Kouji, and Rui - and so Sakura simply waited with Maka and Yuuki and tended to the worst of his wounds while everyone else in the mansion rushed around, preparing themselves.

Not surprisingly, Ogami was the first ready to leave. Slightly more so, Toki was the second. The two begrudging friends shared a look before Toki threw an arm around Ogami, grinning his slanted smile as he did so.

“Don’t die, Angstgami,” he informed his friend with mock seriousness.

“You look like your dad,” Ogami informed him slightly more sincere gravity.

Perhaps Toki could read Ogami better than he knew, for he didn’t take offense. He merely stepped away and leaned in to mutter his own goodbyes to both Yuuki and Maka. Yet what he said Sakura couldn’t have told. Her attention was caught by Ogami, who looked at her with a serious expression before stalking off suddenly into the kitchen. Sakura swallowed. This was it; what they had all been training for. Unlike the others, Ogami and her mother were on a team of two, facing down the hordes of demons they had seen so much of in the past. In their case especially, so much could go wrong. Would he allow her to say goodbye? Maybe even allow her to tell him that she loved him?

Sakura scowled. Even if he didn’t, she could at least wish him good luck! She got up and followed him, entire being focused on finding a way to say goodbye to him even when he would do everything in his power to turn her away. Yet he could die out there, and she would be the last to know - and while she could understand him not wanting to hear that she loved him, she would never forgive herself if she didn’t at least try.

She pushed through the double doors, pulling upon her normal bravado to brazen through the moment. “Ogami, I want to wish you good luck, and please take care of my-

oomph!”

Before the doors had settled behind her, Ogami had spun, picked her up, and pressed her back against the wall. For a moment they simply stared at each other, too charged to do anything other than breathe and want, the world hanging heavily between them. Movement came slowly, fractured into crystallized moments - his eyes slanting down to her lips, her hands latching behind his neck, their noses sliding together, his exhale upon her lips.

Their hesitance melted away when their mouths slotted together, and he began kissing her fiercely. This was not how he had kissed her six years ago, when he’d admitted his love for her to bring her back from the brink. This was how he kissed her now, with the weight of all their years apart sitting heavy on his shoulders, and the depth of his emotions fueling him. Sakura could do nothing other than kiss him back to the best of her ability. Her only kisses had been with him, and she felt almost lost in his worshipful desire. His kiss felt alternatively holy and desperate, and for the first time, she felt as if she could understand the effects of his flame. In this kiss she would allow herself
to burn, could allow the entire world to burn, as long as they could stand here together and die in his all-consuming love.

They did not break away when the kitchen door swung open, and hastily swung shut. Neither did they do not break away when her father began wailing, loudly and obnoxiously, about despoiled daughters. Nor did they when there was the sound of a meaty smack, and her mother’s clear command to shut up, Takehiro. They only broke away when the first flush of their passion passed, and for a moment it felt like the world would not end if they stopped kissing.

Sakura’s eyes fluttered open, aware for the first time of kiss-swollen lips and the desperate hunger in Ogami’s eyes as he searched hers. In comparison she felt calm, steady, powerful beyond her experience.

“Sakura,” he whispered, pressing his lips to her temple, her forehead, as if he could not bear to bring his mouth away for her. Sakura thrilled at the sound of her name on his tongue, hearing him saying it for the first time. “Sakura.” He kissed her once more on the lips before pulling away. “Sakura. No matter what...I’m sorry, I…” His eyes fluttered closed, and he swallowed. “You should know. I lo-”

“Shhhhh.” Surprising even herself, Sakura brought her hand to his mouth. She smiled gently up at him, wondering at her surety even as she continued. “Don’t tell me until you come back, Rei. Promise me. We can finish this when you return safely.”

He nodded slowly, never taking his gaze off of hers. Then he pressed a kiss into her palm, and it was that which decided Sakura. No matter what happened, no matter the course of their future, he would be a part of her. There would be no other lover for her, no other love than what he would give her.

She needed nothing more. He was the only one she could love. There was no more doubt in her soul, and she would accept nothing less.

Her hand trailed down to his, and gripped his firmly. Then, one step at a time, they walked together towards their fate.

Chapter End Notes

THEY DID IT. KISSES FOR EVERYONE. * Throws kisses to audience* And it only took 29 chapters, wooo go me :P

Oh, Matsuhiro. You lying liar that lies…

Soutarou’s parentage is explored more fully in Kyo’s side story, Code:Shot 2. Along with pirates and Rin and sass, and it will be awesome and it’s almost done hoorayyyyy.

The end of the past scenes are creeping upon us. I’m gonna’ be hella sad when they’re done, dang.
***And just for funsies, a part I cut out of the final draft -

(In response to what Takehiro would do without the Shihoins)

“Oh, you know. Enjoy my low and healthy blood pressure. That, and pick on Hideyoshi, mostly.”

Karin tried to grin, but it came out as a grimace. The mentioned of the field marshal’s name made her honest. “I’ll miss you, you know. When Kouji and I leave.”

Takehiro’s hand tightened on hers and his head swung away from her. “Oh, don’t even start. You haven’t gotten rid of me yet! We still have to take down that dragon...and none of us are going anywhere without saying goodbye. Hell, none of us are going anywhere until we even make a battle plan. And you know what that means. Time to find Kouji.”

Karin shook her head. “Takehiro. Whether you head out with Kouji at dawn or choose to go...wherever you go, just know that you are the most insufferable person that I know, and an absolute jerk, and that no matter what happens you’re still my best friend.”

Takehiro pulled to a stop, a pained expression on his face. “Red, what did I tell you about goodbyes?”

“Nothing?”

“This is because we’re not doing them, largely as they make me cry. Now let’s go. Before I start crying, you terrible woman.”

**Because of course Takehiro would start crying. Of course he would.**
Code:Shot # 2 - Kyo and Rin

Chapter Summary

Once upon a time, there was a prince and rare kind, a pirate ship, and a boy made of secrets that brought about the end of the kingdom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Second Code:Shot - Kyo and Rin

Flame and Negation

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Part I - The Pirates

Early Spring, 1896

“Stop her! Don’t let her get away!”

Rin tore past the yelling pirate, feet springing lightly against the deck. Two men stood directly behind him, and her preternaturally good eyesight enabled her to catch the movement of one of them reaching for a wicked looking cutlass that hung at his belt, and so she pulled out a dagger of her own as she spun out of the reach of the other. Steel caught against steel as she deflected the blow, and with a flick of her wrist her attacker stumbled into his friend. Then she was past, and there was only one more pirate standing between her and freedom - or, more accurately, her and the 50 foot drop into either the teeming sea, or the rocky shore.

Rin swore underneath her breath. She had always been a woman for challenges, but this was a bit ridiculous.

Yet the pirates behind her had recovered, and there was no time for further deliberation. She jumped out of reach of a hastily swung dagger, and as she did she reached for the pouch at her waist. Thumbing it open, she grabbed a handful of dirt that she promptly flung right into the face of the pirate in front of her. In better times, she’d have ground pepper or glass, but it had been months since she’d restocked and this would have to do.
The pirate jerked back, swearing. It was all the opening she needed. Rin tore past him, running with an acrobat’s confidence down the gangplank. It only extended ten feet, but that was still ten feet closer to the shore. The water may have seemed a safer bet from this height, but Rin knew that the landing would be fatal to a normal human, and extremely painful to a rare kind. Besides, she had on her person several substances - dangerous substances, that she used only as a last resort - that wouldn’t react well to water. She would just have to get enough speed so that she could propel herself as close as she could to the forest, which was only about 20 feet back from the shore. She could do it, of course. Barely.

Probably.

Two more steps and she reached the end of the gangplank. Ignoring the outraged cries of the pirates behind her - and the crack of an ill-fired pistol - Rin propelled herself into the air. Instinctively folding her body so that she might cut through the air more aerodynamically, she arced like a rocket towards the shore. Yet as she picked up speed and it became painfully obvious that she was not going to quite make it to the cover of the trees, Rin allowed herself to feel a smidgeon of panic.

Oh no, oh no, oh no-

Then, like an answer to the prayer she was too inarticulate to make, a man stepped out from the treeline directly into her trajected path. There was no time to scream a warning, nor for him to dodge. There was only time to realize that this may have been her last, fatal miscalculation before she hit him hard with all the speed and force of a falling rare kind. The collision was too much for even her, and by time his back hit the ground, she had succumbed to unconsciousness.

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Against her calculations, she awoke several hours later, uncaptured, feeling relatively well, and alive. Her entire body ached, of course, and she could tell that she had been stripped of her dagger, but she was untethered, within several feet of a small fire, and blessedly not dead. Slitting her eyes open, she observed that she had been pulled within the relatively safety of the forest. Had the man she had fallen onto saved her? If so, that probably meant he was no ordinary human - he was likely a power user. Yet why then had he helped her? Had he somehow not realized what she was?

That was the big question. If he didn’t know, she could get out of this situation as prettily as a picture. If he did...well. Things were about to get complicated.

Interrupting her unpromising line of thought was a low, harsh voice that sounded more like a pirate’s than the three she’d held comparable conversation with. “Ya know, for a girl with enough guts to jump off a pirate ship, ya sure as hell ain’t being very brave now.”

Rin froze, and all progress she’d made at pretending to be unconscious was lost. Preparing her most inscrutable expression, she rolled over. She hoped she wasn’t about to look her death in the face.

“That’s better. ‘S long as ya don’t start screaming and carrying on, I guess.”

The man on the other side of the fire was physically fit - clearly none the worse for her landing on him - and looked to be no more than five or at most ten years older than herself. The flickering
flames cast an uncertain light on his features, softening what was normally a handsome yet austere face. She added to her opinion of him as he stoked the fire. He slouched like a foreigner, and his accent matched some of the poorer denizens of the towns furthest away from the palace. This was no cosmopolitan man - he was rustic and independent, and if previous experience with men of his ilk was any indication, likely to chafe at the thought of anyone telling him what to do.

All this was good, as it meant he was less likely to turn her into the proper authorities. Yet what made her breath catch in her throat was his power. Even from this distance, she could feel that he was the strongest power user she’d ever met. Strength seeped off of him in waves, potent enough to make her blood chill in her veins. No wonder he hadn’t been fazed from her falling on him - the man was a veritable monster! Neither had he needed to restrain her. Rin was canny and quick and as slippery as a fish, but in terms of power she was only a mid level rare kind. She would have had trouble fighting off a matching power user in a fair fight, and would stand no chance engaging a man of this calibre.

Yet so far he had done nothing but help her. Maybe he was too powerful to register what she was? She had to trust to her luck and her mysterious benefactor’s generosity, and maybe she’d get out of this alive.

Before she could decide what was safest to say - she’d settled for fixing him with an unblinking stare, to see if it would unsettle him - he cracked his neck and settled back onto his palms. “So’re ya mute then? That’s no fun. Wouldn’t have saved ya if I knew you were this boring.”

He shook his head. “What shitty luck. Hate being bored.”

Something about the man’s lazy cadence made Rin’s tongue separate itself from her brain and her good sense. All plans of scoping out the situation flew out of her head as she instinctively responded. “If that’s the case, may I suggest finding a hobby? Preferably one that doesn’t include me, please. Like rock gardening. Or knitting.”

Her rescuer watched her with narrowed eyes for a long, tense moment as Rin’s heart fell to her stomach. Then, unexpectedly, he threw back his head and laughed. His gaiety lasted for a quite a while, and it nettled Rin enough to rise into a sitting position. Her brows furrowed as she watched him. His unexpected reaction aside, this was like baiting a tiger with a very short stick. What the hell was she doing, answering him like that? How long would her luck hold out? And just who was this strange, dangerous man?

Finally his laughter abated and he directed his full attention back at her, a half smile on his lips. Even his smile was offputting, Rin reflected, like a snake circling a bird’s nest. She felt no urge to smile back at him. Rather, something about his amusement just made her more annoyed. “Figured ya’d have spunk, girlie. Need it to jump off a pirate ship like that. Now, if I asked ya what ya were doing on the ship in the first place, ya’d probably not tell me, yeah? So I won’t even ask. What I do want to know - and remember how I just saved your rare little life, and all - is when we’re going back.”

Now that she had more opportunity to hear it, she realized there was something off about his accent. Yet Rin couldn’t quite place it - it almost seemed to fluctuate, making it impossible for her to tell precisely where he was from. To her, who had travelled from one end of the island to the other, trading with people from every village and becoming something of an expert on power users’ accents, this was deeply unsettling. He couldn’t possibly be faking it, could he? For what purpose?

Then she realized what he had just implied. Her blood stilled in her veins, yet her quick thinking kept her from panicking. “Sir, you must be joking.” Figuring she could escape if she made him
laugh again, she continued. “Pirate ships are terrible places for first dates. Third date at the
absolute earliest.”

His reaction was quicker this time, and Rin was off like a shot as soon as his head tilted back and
his eyes squeezed shut. Trees whipped by her and she raced through the forest - she had always
been fast, had even beaten Takehiro in a race or two when they were younger - and she hoped that
her rescuer (captor?) was built more along the lines of power rather than speed. For a few,
breathless moments she thought she had done it. There was no sound of chase, and as soon as she
got her bearings she could make it to the hidden cache she and her partners had set up several
nights prior. Once there, no one would ever find her. Rare kinds were uncommonly good at going
to earth, and-

There was a flash of color directly in front of her, and Rin skidded to a stop a moment too late. She
stumbled into the obstruction, and only when his arms caught at her arms did she realize it was the
man from the campfire. Somehow he had caught up to her and cut her off. She was doomed.

“Now, now, girlie. It’s pretty rude to just dash off like that, even if ya didn’t like the venue of the,
uh, date. Couples gotta’ work through their differences, yeah? Communicate. Least, that’s what
I’ve heard.”

Rin very nearly growled. She had never met someone that made her terrified yet blindly angry at
the same time, and as such had no idea how to deal with this maddening man. Normally the most
even-tempered of women, she found herself losing her temper. “What is wrong with you? What do
you want? Why do you keep on chasing after me?” And then, after a moment’s heaving
consideration, “And why haven’t you killed me yet?”

His eyebrows rose. “Do ya want me to?”

“No!”

He shook his head. “Women. I dunno’ whether they’re coming or going. Neither do they, I
suspect.” He exhaled roughly, and suddenly Rin was very aware that he held her securely by the
arms, and that they were alone in a huge forest, where no one would hear her screams. Yet if she
was going to die, she would do it bravely, and it would all make sense. No more of this illogical
encounter with a man who made as much sense as a child’s riddle!

She kept her eyes level, focusing on the subtle rise and fall of his sternum rather than look at his
face. “Don’t play games with me. You know what I am. You’re too powerful not to. All I ask is
that you’re quick about it. I can’t help being who I am. Just do it and go.” She tried not to think
about all she’d left behind - the Enclave, her family...and her two partners left onboard the ship.
She’d meant to rescue them, but all had gone awry. And now this. Rin closed her eyes, and set her
shoulders. She’d known the consequences when she’d left the Enclave, and she certainly would not
regret them now.

Yet the moment stretched on and on, and finally her resolve wavered. What in the gods’ names
was he waiting for? Finally she cracked open her eyes and gazed up, wincing a little as she did so.
Had he been waiting for her to look up? If so, now was the moment he’d strike-

He didn’t. All he did was look down at her with a bored expression that made Rin want to punch
him, just to see if the look would waver. The man’s obstinacy made her growl, and that made his
expression shift, but not in the way she’d like.

“Well, that’s just adorable-”
“Argh!” His grip loosened enough for Rin to tear herself away. This time, she didn’t run. There was no point. He was clearly stronger and faster than her, and for the moment, disposed to like her. She simply backed away a few feet and folded her arms, fixing him with an expression that clearly read and now what?

She was done talking. Clearly, things just didn’t go well when she tried.

The man exhaled again, and scratched his head. “All right, girlie. Yeah, I know what ya are. Be hard not to, what with the whole falling on me thing. Now if I told you I didn’t give a shit, would that make ya stop running like a spooked dog? ‘Cuz it’s getting a bit tiring. I’m not as young and spry as I used to be.”

Rin’s scowled and her intent to stay mute dissolved. “So you’re saying I should just ignore a lifetime of warnings and fear to trust you, the most powerful power user I’ve ever met...just because you told me to?”

The man grinned, yet this time it didn’t make the hair on her flesh rise. Good gods, did that mean she was getting used to this man? And perhaps the world might end before she got used to that notion, as well. “Well, yeah. Why wouldn’t you? And ‘cuz I saved your life. Remember that? I think ya should keep that fact firmly in mind, here.”

Rin’s ability to handle this situation had once again hit rock bottom, and she spoke without thinking. “Are you always this maddening?”

Rather than taking offense, his smile widened. “So, I think we should head back to the pirate ship tonight. Nobody’ll expect it. Especially us working as a team. Whaddya’ say, girlie?”

The gut instinct to refuse was replaced by images of Ryoutaro and his son, 14 year-old Takashi. Here was an unexpected chance to rescue them...as long as it wasn’t a trap instead. “And how do I know you’re not one of them? How do I know this isn’t a trap?”

He pretended to consider it, pursing his lips and tapping his chin. All the more, Rin wanted to deck him. “Hmmmm. A rare kind slave is kind of a unique commodity...but I think ya’d be a pretty hard lady to pin down. ‘Specially as this crew is pretty sloppy in hand to hand fighting, and mostly relies on their special powers. Besides, if I was workin’ with ‘em, ya’d already be trussed up and back on that ship. Which you’re not, if ya hadn’t noticed. All the more reason to trust me, obviously.”

Reasoning with this man was like reasoning with the devil, if the devil made very little sense and appeared to have no real plan other than to go where the wind took him. Rin found herself shaking her head in amazement. “But why do you want to go there? If you’re not working with them...?”

He smiled again, and it was different than his previous smiles. This was a smile that took her veins from ice to blazing within moments. Her heart turned over in her chest yet she was not entirely sure it was from fear.

“I told ya before, girlie. I hate bein’ bored.” Then, he extended his hand in an imitation of a westerner’s greeting. “Name’s Kyo. Pleased to meet ya, partner.”
The girl was jumpier than a small dog, but Kyo figured she’d do. At the very least, she’d give the pirates something pretty to look at while he gutted them like a fish. Using his power would be too easy, he decided, as he snuck a glance down at his determined little companion. Besides, it would probably spook her further. Nah, he’d see what he could do without using his flame. It would be a good test for both him and her.

Make things a little more interesting, at any rate.

“Ok. So the plan is we stay out of sight, free my friends, take whatever it is you are coming for and simply not telling me about, and then we get off the boat. If we run into anyone we shut them up quickly - and not by killing them, Kyo. They’ll just come after us harder if we do. With a little luck we’re in and out in less than an hour. Got it?”

He shot her a less guarded look and had to swallow down another laugh. The girl had known him for less than three hours - well, had been conscious for about that long, maybe - and she already had his number. Her earlier vacillation between sass and fear had also been amusing, but since he’d finally convinced her that he wasn’t about to up and kill her, she had settled back into bossy, just as he’d suspected. It was interesting to stand next to someone and know that they didn’t fear him for what his power could do to them. He couldn’t get used to it or anything, but taking a holiday from being the feared illegitimate prince of the realm was refreshing.

His eyes shuttered as she walked ahead to where the rowboat was moored. There was another reason he wouldn’t use his powers on this little jaunt. If the girlie caught wind of who he was - and there was only one family in Takama ga hara who could wield hellflame - she’d be off faster than a jackhare. In the darkness, he might not catch her. Probably wouldn’t be fair to, if she knew who he was.

Kyo shrugged his shoulders, wondering why the hell he even cared. Was he really that bored? Or was the novelty of someone not knowing what he was really that exciting?

The girl turned around - Rin, she’d said, but hell would freeze over before he called a lady her proper name, rare kind or no - and looked back curiously at him. “Well? Are you ready?”

He’d think later. Now was the time for action. “Lead on, girlie.”

Captives were almost always chained in the belly of the ship. That way, it’d be easy to chain them to something heavy, and be the hardest for them to escape. As long as they weren’t an attractive girl - or boy - that was where Kyo figured they’d be. He mentioned that to the girl as they slipped over the side of the ship, figuring her companions were both older guys, from the way she’d spoken so respectfully about them. She’d definitely called one Uncle, he remembered hearing that much.

Yet she’d paled almost immediately, and jerked on his shirt when she’d asked him where they
might take the young and attractive captives. Kyo didn’t bring attention to the fact that she was choosing to touch him, but noticed it nonetheless.

*Captain’s quarters,* he told her in a hushed voice. Speaking this quietly, it was harder to call upon the assumed, lazy drawl he’d picked up during his travels. *And that makes our rescue a bit more complicated, doesn’t it?*

Her reply was cut off by the sudden, unmistakable sound of revelry on the other side of the ship. Pressing close against the packed cargo crates, they made their way into eavesdropping range. The girl’s eyes were better, and it was she who noticed that the Captain was among the revelers, although the crack of the whip convinced them that this was no party they wanted to attend. The captain was punishing the men who had allowed her to escape, and judging by the look on her face, she was both pleased and a bit sickened at the thought of their punishment.

Not for the first time, Kyo wondered just how old she was and what her life might be like. She had passed out of girlhood obviously enough, yet for a woman who’d spend her life on the run, she was a bit more innocent than he’d expect. Clearly not an assassin then, and likely not a hardened thief. What had prompted her to target a pirate ship, then?

She touched him again, tugging on his hand to lead him away from the flogging. Girlie really had lost her fear of him right quick, and Kyo wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Sure, it was nice that someone wasn’t afraid of him, but it probably shouldn’t make his stomach flop over like that. This was definitely not the time to be seasick, after all.

They made their way to the captain’s quarters, dodging two men on patrol, and knocking an inebriated yet sharp-eyed third unconscious. Kyo suspected the girlie would have given him a look for that one, but now they were directly outside the captain’s quarters and judging from the muffled sounds from within, they had found at least one of her friends. He glanced over at her, wondering if this was the point in the evening where their cover would be blown - and that point would come, he was certain of it. Blasting open the door would start the party off a bit earlier than expected, but it was a party he’d always intended on attending. Yet she surprised him once again. She took to one knee, reaching blindly into the pouch at her waist. Her fingers fumbled, and then withdrew a long, silver pin with a hooked edge.

Kyo grinned. Lockpicking wasn’t a skill he’d ever picked up, but he guessed he wouldn’t begrudge the rare kind’s unexpected skill. Not everyone could be as powerful as he, after all.

She worked quietly, the pin catching against the inside of the rusted lock. Kyo glanced around, wondering if the faint noises would alert the two wandering pirates. Yet he focused on her again when she whispered his name. The door spun inwards at her touch and she shot through before he could think to warn her. There were other dangers in the dark, and she was a fool if she thought a pirate might not ward his den…

“*Rin! You’re here!*”

Kyo stuck his head in the door, surprised not only at the voice, but at how old it sounded. That was no teenager, taken against their will to be a pirate’s personal slave. His eyebrows rose as he watched the girl hug first the speaker, a stooped, older man - couldn’t be a day under 60 - before turning to help him unlock the manacles off of a teenaged boy. Well, well. Both her companions in the same place? Girlie had stuck lucky. Although he knew *that* to begin with. She was travelling with him, after all.

“*Ryoutaro, take your son to the rowboat. Don’t worry about the supplies, I’ll get it back from whatever he’s got stashed in here. If I’m not out in ten minutes, I’ll meet you at the mainland.*” She
interrupted herself to lean down and hug the boy, and there was just enough light for Kyo to make out his blush. “If I’m not back by noon tomorrow go on without me. We’ll meet up at the third stop on our route. Now, go!”

The old man took his kid by the hand, and Kyo melted into the shadows to let them through. Touching as reunions were, he wanted no part of them. Besides, they’d probably get just as jumpy about being rare kinds as she had.

Kyo shook his head. The girlie had clearly been frightened about being found out, but he’d always known that rare kinds weren’t impossible, just rare. Although most people thought they were myth, he had always known better, partially because of his upbringing, and partially due to his keen analytical mind. A people didn’t just die out because they weren’t making themselves obvious, after all - rare kinds had popped in and out of Takama ga hara’s history for millennia, and just because no one had seen one in several hundred years didn’t mean they were extinct.

The important thing that he had learned was that they weren’t as impossible to pick out as he’d thought. Now that he’d encountered three of them, he knew how to feel the blank space that touched the outer edges of his awareness, like ink spreading in a pool. If the girl hadn’t touched him, he might not have figured it out, but now that he knew the feeling, he thought he could tell even without physical contact. It was a useful skill to keep in mind for the future.

Yet that was neither here nor there.

Kyo slunk back into the captain’s quarters just as the girl had unlocked a trunk in the corner. She glanced back over her shoulder, and it was a testament to her mercurial moods that she smiled broadly over at him. “Hey Kyo, check this out.”

He shouldn’t enjoy her good mood. It was unfounded, no matter what he’d told her. Yet he did as she asked, unconsciously charmed by her trust. “What?”

She held out a mirror, being careful to hold it by its stem and not look into its reflection. “It’s the treasure trove. Here, see if you can wrap this in something. Try not to look at it though. Apparently this is the fabled Mirror of Desire - one glance will show you what you desire most. I’m going to keep unloading.” She took out a few more extraneous items as Kyo stuck the mirror into an old sock. Magical mirror or not, it was the only thing at hand. The girl could complain later.

As she unpacked she spoke in a low, quiet, trusting tone and Kyo found himself unable to hurry her along. “We’d been traveling with a caravan, this time. There were only a couple power users - nothing we couldn’t hide from. An old woman was traveling with a few treasures. She’d wanted to sell them at the Palace marketplace. But we were overtaken by the pirates on an inland raid, and she was killed along with several others in the caravan.”

She set down a small box that after removing the top revealed a tea set. “They talked about going after them, but everyone else was too scared. So I went instead. But I messed up. Takashi - the boy - came after me, and his dad after him...they were captured. I’d gotten on the boat, but couldn’t get off with them...so I jumped. You know what happened after that. What- oh, this.”

She held up a weathered old corset. “This was in the old woman’s inventory as well. She said she got it from a westerner, but maybe she was lying.” The girl smiled sadly. “She said the wearer would never grow old or lose her charm - but if that was true, then why would she stop wearing it?” She looked down at it a moment longer before she buckled it into place around her waist. Without any adjustment, it fit perfectly. That seemed to surprise her, but she grinned.
“Well. At least it will give me a little protection. Now, what do you need my help with?”

I’m here to assassinate a Captain and his crew, and rid the kingdom of one of the most tenacious thorns in its side. Kyo’s eyes flickered as he looked at her, all innocence and trust and practicality, with a quiet yet pronounced penchant for being irreverent in the face of danger.

He found himself answering in a way that would have astounded every nobleman who’d ever met him, all well-used to his brutal honesty and lack of empathy. “I’m just here for a bit of excitement, girlie. I have a feeling I’ll never lack for that when I’m around you.”

His accent slipped because he was distracted with a sound from behind him. No, not a sound - it was the absence of it, and sudden air of caution when before there was none. He registered this and then there was only time to draw his katana before his attacker came rushing in. Three easy, practiced movements and the pirate lay dead on the floor, but not before his partner began yelling, alerting everyone on board.

“Damn.” The girl stood and swept everything into a bag, unfolded from that much-used pouch at her waist. “We’ll have to run. Kyo, do you think-”

But he had already moved. He had gone after the fleeing pirate, cutting through him just before he had reached the safety of the rest of the crew. He spun back, knowing there was very little time. If he was going to get the girl off the boat it had to be now.

Thankfully the little chit hadn’t come after him. Instead she had made her way to the boat where her friends waited, and unloaded her cargo. Yet from behind him he felt the rumble of the feet pounding the decks, and with a calculated glance, shoved her into the boat.

“What are - Kyoooooo-!”

He sliced the ropes holding the boat - missing one, but it wouldn’t tip the boat over - and down they went, his name ending in a yelp of surprise. Then he took off across the deck, leading the pirates away from her. Moving as a half-drunk, uncoordinated mass he was able to avoid them and make it to the other side of the ship, giving himself just enough space to prepare.

He’d probably never see her again. A pity. She was fun.

He flicked his katana carelessly with his wrist as the pirates surrounded him with blades, torches and arrows. He tensed, waiting for the attack, yet the men held their positions. After a moment Kyo saw why - Captain Mako swaggered up to him, natural confidence aided by drink. He still held the whip, yet in the other hand he held a well-sharpened katana. Kyo’s eyes narrowed. Mako was over-confident, yes, but he had been a highly skilled student of the old style. His father had suggested taking him out before the man could rely on his skills...but that was boring, and Kyo hated being bored.

“Well, well, boys. What do we have here?”

They hadn’t recognized him. Kyo smiled. It was better this way - he’d be able to stick to his resolution and not use his ability...draw out the fight just a bit more. “Just a traveller, passing through. Seemed to have stumbled into something fun though. Nice boat ya got here - ya’ll wouldn’t be pirates, now, would ya?”

The accent he had adopted hid his exalted station and thus provided him with the anonymity he had always craved, yet it had the negative side effect of causing his foes to underestimate him. True challenges were hard to come by when your enemy thought you a country bumpkin. Yet perhaps
the gods were looking down on him - had probably been doing so since they sent the rare kind
shooting down from the sky directly onto him - because for once, the enemy wasn’t taken in.
Mako’s eyes narrowed, and his stance shifted slightly into a far more dangerous pose. The pirate’s
canny instincts were honed from years of experience, and he recognized a true threat when he saw
one.

After a tense moment where each man took in the other, judging their skill from sight alone, Mako
roared. Pirates raced towards him, feet pounding on the deck and torches swinging wildly as they
jostled to be the first to take down the intruder. At the center, eerily still before the hoard
converged upon him, Kyo grinned. It was the smile of the damned.

Let the carnage commence.

... ...

... ...

The boat hadn’t touched down before Rin’s shock gave way to fury. Kyo had - he had left her!
After all that talk about trust and calling her partner he had shoved her out of the way when things
got rough with no more consideration than a woman would shove a cabbage into her bag on market
day. As if Rin wasn’t a rare kind and couldn’t take care of herself!

Only Ryoutaro’s hand over her mouth kept her from calling out to him again, in increasingly angry
tones. “Rin! Stop! If you call out for him the pirates will know that we are here!”

Rin swallowed. She had nearly forgotten her companions in her anger. But Ryoutarou was right -
shouting at him would accomplish nothing. Drastic measures would have to be taken. With a quick
glance towards the one uncut rope she knew exactly what she had to do. “I - I understand. I’ll be
quiet.”

Takashi suddenly leaned up from his task of unravelling one of the ropes that dangled in the water.
His sharp eyes caught something that signalled her intention. “Wait, Rin? What are you doing-
Rin!”

Ryoutaro turned to look at his son and Rin used that moment to leap onto the uncut rope securing
the other side of the boat, closest to the ship. She used her initial momentum to climb five feet
upwards, well out of her friends’ range.

“Rin!” This time, they both hissed at her in unison, and in the exact same tone of exasperation and
anxiety. Rin suppressed a nervous grin as she clamped her knees down on the rope, keeping her
from sliding back down. Like father like son, it seemed.

“You guys cut the rope and row to shore. I’ll be back. I have to help him.”

“Rin - I don’t know who your companion is-”

“Neither do I,” Rin muttered, interrupting Ryoutaro with an annoyed glance.
Ryoutaro kept going with an annoyed glance of his own. “And I honor his bravery. But if you go back now, he’ll know what you are. You think you’ll be able to keep our secret if you run up and fight power users? This is exactly the kind of situation we must avoid at all costs!”

He was right. In a world where it was Kyo’s protection or her people’s, every lesson, every promise, every instinct screamed at her to get back into the boat and leave Kyo to his fate. All instincts save one - and somehow, it was that feeling that made her remember Kyo’s crazy laugh, and that wild look in his eye, and his total lack of fear - his total inability to understand why he should fear her. It made her remember when he called her partner, and when he stuffed the mirror that showed your every desire into a sock without looking twice. It was nonsensical. It would likely get her killed.

Rin shook her head, and shimmied up another five feet.

“Rin!”

She said nothing. She wasn’t sure what madness had gripped her, but clearly it wouldn’t stop until she got back up there and saved him. He was powerful, but no one was powerful enough to take on Captain Mako, the most dreaded power user pirate Takama ga hara had ever known, alongside a full crew. Every single person on the ship had a well-developed special power, and there was little to no chance that she would make it out alive, let alone with her secret intact. Yet she had to help him. Otherwise he’d die, and no matter how maddening he was, she knew with full certainty that outcome was unacceptable.

She pulled herself up the rope as fast as possible, hands scorching with rope burn, labored breath catching in her throat. Now that her course of action had been decided, she feared she had taken too long. Kyo had taken off for the other edge of the boat to buy them some time, but how long would a man like that run? Not very long, she suspected, especially when the light of battle was in his eye.

When she reached the top Rin threw herself over the edge of the boat, panting. She took only a moment to regain her breath and her bearings. Then she took off across the deck, taking minimal care to keep out of sight. The moon was high and full, and there was plenty of light to see by, but she didn’t need it. Judging from the noise alone, every pirate on deck - and Kyo - were in the same place.

She pulled herself up onto some unloaded cargo, blending in with the shadows. A high vantage point was an advantage, but not an unassailable one. Better was the pouch of gunpowder she wore at her waist, and the waterproof matches in her breast binding. This was probably a terrible idea, but it was the only one she had. Cause the cargo to explode, and the crew would mill about in confusion, trying to set out the fires and catch her at the same time. If she could just get through them to Kyo and get him off the boat...the fall probably wouldn’t kill either of them, unless he was very injured. If that was the case...

Rin swallowed thickly. If that was the case then this would very likely be her last stand. She had to know, first. Shaking out a small amount of gunpowder onto the cargo box, she leaned over so that only half her face was visible from behind the box. What she saw made her draw in a long, ragged breath.

Kyo was surrounded by half the ship’s pirates. The other half lay on the ground, in varying degrees of injury and dismemberment. Clearly, he had fought them to a temporary standstill. Yet just as clearly, he was now in trouble.

The captain of the ship was examining a katana, having just sheathed one at his hip. With a fluid motion, he brought it down over his knee and it snapped in two. Kyo scowled, and Rin knew with
certainty that the blade had been his. Now he was weaponless and outmatched, and unless Rin set the cargo alight right now, anything else would be too late-

She fumbled for the matches, yet even as she did she caught snatches of the captain’s final words. “…finally found… air. I had wondered…father-”

Rin leapt onto a higher box, preparing to light and drop the match from above. Yet she chanced one more look, and what she saw turned her to stone. The unlit match slipped from her fingers.

She would not need the fire. Kyo had that in abundance.

Blue flame shot from his fingers, utterly engulfing the captain. Every man on the shop took an instinctive step backwards, save for the first mate, who moved to help his captain. Yet it was too late. The flame burned brighter and hotter than any fire known to man, and within moments the flesh had charred away from the bone. The skeleton fell to the deck, breaking into dust upon landing.

Rin’s eyes widened and in her shock, forgot to hide. Everyone knew what hellflame was - most of all the rare kinds. They also knew the only family that wielded it. She had muttered to Ryoutaro as she infiltrated the ship that she hadn’t known who Kyo was, but now she did. There were only two men in the kingdom who could command hellflame, after all.

The king…and his illegitimate son.

She watched with a dull, throbbing understanding as the pirates, enraged by the death of their beloved captain, attacked him once more. They were no threat to him, of course. He was the second most powerful man in the kingdom - and some argued he was the most powerful man in the kingdom - and he took them down with ease. Flame lit each man like a living candle, and in a spectacular show of ability, he burned them each one by one, touching them personally, rather than shooting off his fire in a shower of sparks, or a rain of flame.

Rin’s heart felt like a stone in her chest. He moved with a terrible grace as he cut from man to man, slicing through the shadows like a child’s nightmare. The flames from his hands guttered brightly against the night and their fear. It was primal. It was terrifying.

It was beautiful.

Rin wiped away salty tears from her eyes, wondering when she had started to cry. She could see that to him, every movement, every kill was joyful, and that smile that had set her blood to boiling was ever present on his lips. She had suspected that he had lived for battle, and now she knew. She also knew with bone deep certainty that his smile would haunt her for the rest of her natural life. Perhaps it was a thankful thing that he would have to kill her soon. Perhaps she should just let him do it now.

Sooner than she thought possible every pirate on board was a living pyre. Some burned more slowly than others, burning alive by inches. Yet the flame had not yet spread across the deck. He managed to control the flame to keep it burning only human flesh, not the oiled wood of the ship. For some reason, this only made Rin cry harder. Kyo was masterful, precise, and without a doubt the next ruler of Takama ga hara. When he was king, he would be the one to spearhead any efforts to end her people. Now that he had met her, he knew that rare kinds existed. What kind of ruler would he be if he allowed their threat to remain?

She had doomed her people when she had met him. Everything that would happen now would be all her fault.
Sense only returned to her when Kyo had dispatched the last man on deck. She ducked back down onto the box she had sprinkled the gunpowder on, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes. Her earlier sense of fatalism was fading quickly now that she could no longer see Kyo. So what if he knew what she was? He couldn’t kill what he couldn’t catch, and if she got out of here now she might survive this.

And maybe... just maybe, he might choose to forget about her being a rare kind.

Yet her plans of escape ended before she could set them into motion. Her only warning was the smell of smoke and man, and a sudden gust of hot wind at her neck. Then there was his voice - familiar even after only a few hours of knowing him, yet the cadence was not. “You’re always surprising me, girlie. Hadn’t thought I’d ever see you again.”

Kyo stood at her back, like a monster from nightmares. Somehow he had pinpointed her exact location. Unlike before, Rin did not close her eyes. Instead she tilted her chin up and looked back over her shoulder, looking her end dead in the eyes. This time she wasn’t going to be afraid.

“I came back for you,” she admitted, and hoped that those would not be her last words.

Kyo’s hair fell to his shoulders in total disarray, and soot smudged his face. He smelled of sweat, blood, and smoke, and the look in his eyes was nearly feral. Yet Rin could not look away. Never before had she seen anything so viscerally beautiful, and the surprise in his expression when she admitted that she was here to help him was something she would hold onto beyond the grave.

He opened his mouth, but what he might have said was lost when the ground sparked below them. Rin barely had time to realize what had happened - Kyo had accidentally set her gunpowder alight with a small scrap of flame hugging his person - before all went to hell. Thankfully Kyo sensed the danger and moved more quickly than she. Just as the gunpowder lit, he dove for the water, shielding her body from the explosion and taking her with him.

The boxes of cargo ignited, sending up a roaring, blue bonfire. Rin caught sight of it as they fell, and would remember it along with the strength of his arms and his breath in her ear forever after. Then, just before they hit the water, there was time for a fleeting thought - that perhaps she had been wrong all this time. Maybe he wouldn’t kill her. Maybe Kyo would prove her wrong, just as he always had.

They hit the water with a painful, jarring impact. It made Rin glad she had chosen to aim for the land on her first fall. Yet thinking of anything other than the water dragging her limbs down and the dwindling air in her lungs was impossible. All she had energy for was the effort to swim back to the surface and then the shore, one arm arcing far more weakly through the water than the other. Kyo noticed she was lagging just as her strength gave out, and he tugged her along with him for the last twenty or so yards. Then, he pulled her up the shoreline, swinging her into his arms in a princess carry when they reached the safety of the trees.

Afterwards, Rin remembered him carrying her to their old campfire, but just barely. It was a series of jerky images and of bright sensations. The strength of his arms, his warmth - like an inferno, even after their immersion in the cold water, the swaying movement as he shifted her up as gently as he could. Yet the light and the warmth of natural fire made her rally. She had to come to her senses because Kyo was either about to kill her, or leave forever. Either way, she wanted to be lucid when it happened.

He laid her down gently, and Rin gripped his sleeve. It was a coquettish gesture that she normally would have snorted at, but it was all she had strength for at the moment. His dark eyes flicked over to hers, and when she spoke it was raspy with all the saltwater she had swallowed. “Why did you
save me?”

Kyo rolled his eyes, as if her question was ridiculous. As if he wasn’t part of the royal bloodline, and she a rare kind. As if the question mattered at all. Something inside of Rin unclenched, but at the same time it annoyed her as well. “Girlie, now ain’t the time-”

Rin never took her eyes from his. “You’re the heir to the kingdom. Someday… someday you’ll be the king. Your family hates the rare kinds more than anyone - isn’t it your duty to kill any of us you meet?” Her strength failed, and tears threatened to well up. Rin shut her eyes against their scalding warmth, missing the fleeting, complicated expression on her saviour’s face. “But you saved me. Twice. I want to thank you, and to pay you back, and to be your friend- but I don’t…I don’t understand.” She took a deep breath, and opened her eyes. “I don’t understand you. Why did you help me? Why don’t you hate me? Why did you let me live?”

Rin’s eyes searched his for any hint to this thoughts, but Kyo’s eyes were like dark jewels in his face, only reflecting the light of the campfire. It was impossible to glean what he was thinking or feeling, and Rin felt that familiar annoyance rise up. She wanted to know. She wanted to know everything she could about this impossible, flippant, amazing man who held her life and the safety of the kingdom in his hand.

Perhaps some of her determination influenced him, as Kyo suddenly kneeled over her, bringing his hands to cup her face. Rin’s breath stilled in her lungs, forcing her to take small, quick breaths. His hands were rough, large, and surprisingly gentle against her face, and would have given her body chills had he not been looking at her with utmost attention. No man had ever looked at her like this before. Rin suspected that no man could ever look at her quite like this - with such ferocity and precision, curiosity and…

The tips of his fingers suddenly began tingling against her face, sending a little jolt of pleasure down her body. Rin couldn’t help a quiet, surprised hum, and her eyelids fluttered. Yet then a brilliant white light cut through the clearing, momentarily illuminating the forest around them. Rin snapped back to attention just in time to register Kyo removing his hands from her face, his index finger lingering just a little longer than the others.

Rin blinked owlishly up at him, surprised at the gentleness in his touch and the sudden flash of light. It couldn’t have been him - the light was the wrong color, and nothing around her had caught fire. Could it possibly be…? The elders had told stories of negation, of rare kinds cancelling out the effect of power users. Yet they had said nothing about a light - more a vortex of dark power that, if one lost control of it, sucked out the life of all power users around them. This was something simple, almost benign. Yet what else could it be?

More importantly, had he really used his power on her as he touched her so gently?

Kyo ignored her searching eyes, stood and walked around to the other side of the fire, settling a log onto the blaze as he did so. He didn’t look at her, and his avoidance made her annoyance rise up, giving her another boost to escape sleep’s hold.

She scowled. Touching her face was not an acceptable answer to any of her questions, no matter how surprisingly nice it felt. Or had it been? Kyo was a man of action, rather than words, but what could his action possibly mean? Was that his test? He couldn’t use his power on her, so he’d just leave her alone?

“Kyo-”

“Do you know what a man thinks when you say his name like that?” Kyo stoked the fire so that
eddies of sparks flew up in the sky. Looking at him through the light they provided was beautiful, and Rin was struck by a sense of deja vu. They had been like this before, but this time Rin did not want to run. She suspected that if Kyo ran, however, she wouldn’t be able to catch him.

Rin pushed forward purposefully, not catching the undertones to his statement. She was, for all her competence, an innocent woman. “Maybe he thinks that he should at least answer one of my questions. Otherwise I’ll say a lot more than just that.”

He sighed. “I gave you an answer. You just weren’t listening.”

His accent was gone, and Rin wasn’t sure whether she appreciated his cultured tones, or regretted them. This was how a king spoke, Rin thought. Not Kyo. “I know that. I felt it. Your power. It tingled.” His eyebrows furrowed and Rin rushed forward before he could think about her nonsensical response any further...or ask about the white light. “Is that why then? You won’t kill me because you can’t with your power?”

Kyo blinked, and the last remaining moisture on his eyelashes settled onto his cheeks. He glanced off into the forest, looking utterly bored. “I told you how I felt about being bored.”

“But-”

His gaze swung from the forest to her, and the intensity in his stare cut her off. Here it was - his gaze from before, when he had used his power on her to no avail. “I’ll answer if you do first. Why did you come back for me?”

Rin inhaled, never breaking eye contact with him. A thousand thoughts and reasons fluttered around inside of her like trapped butterflies, yet none of them was still long enough for her to grab it, and offer it to him. *I don’t leave people behind and It was partially my fault and you called me partner. Even now, I trust you. You’re Kyo.*

*I can’t imagine living in this world without you in it.*

Rin could say none of these without betraying her people or herself. So she watched him, trying to tell him everything and nothing at all with her gaze. Had this been how he’d felt when she’d peppered him with questions?

To his credit, his asked nothing else. He simply watched her with that maddeningly still expression, and waited as exhaustion threatened to pull Rin under.

They watched each other for what seemed like hours, until Rin finally surrendered to sleep. She fought herself for as long as she could, but it had been a long few days and with the adrenaline and the physical shock of jumping off a pirate ship twice in as many days, she couldn’t hold out. She knew that Kyo would leave once she closed her eyes, but dawn was a long ways off and she knew she’d never make it. So as her eyes fluttered closed, she whispered the only thing she could think of.

“Goodnight, partner.”

She did not hear him respond.

**Part II - The Boy**

**Late Winter, 1896**
Kyo hummed a little tune as he made his way through the snow-driven forest, settling the sack over his shoulder as he did so. Many people would be uncomfortable with the thought of him being a humming sort of man, but he didn’t really care what most people thought of him. Besides, he did take quite a bit of enjoyment in proving people wrong. Plus, the tune was catchy.

The tune trailed off as he lost the melody, however. He always forgot how exactly how the second phrase went - ah, but it was no matter. He would return to the palace shortly, and would undoubtedly hear the tune again there. Of course, he would be hearing plenty of other things during his stay there, including all about his father’s new consort and queen.

Kyo grimaced. His life had gotten much harder since his father had remarried, and it was not just because of the increase in his duties, nor the demon attacks at the coast. The new queen’s special ability was to read one’s secrets and to gauge one’s character by their intentions. Along with the difference in their personalities and the natural awkwardness of their situation, this made every interaction with her exceedingly difficult. Kyo had plenty of secrets of his own to keep, not to mention the one or two he was keeping for his father.

The sack squirmed on his shoulder. Kyo patted it in his most reassuring manner, offhandedly hoping he wasn’t patting anywhere inappropriate.

Yes, the old man owed him big for his current situation. Not that the boy was anything onerous - the boy was sharp, strong, and lively, and he rather liked the little scamp. He possibly would have offered to raise him as his own and in utter secrecy even if his father hadn’t commanded him to. After all, he couldn’t forget what his own upbringing was like, wandering around the palace with no one to protect him but himself, at odds with all who thought to curry favor by culling the king’s illegitimate disgrace. And since Soutarou didn’t have the power of hellflame to draw upon, the boy would be easy pickings for some unscrupulous nobleman.

Of course, it wasn’t just them he had to worry about. If the boy ever crossed paths with the queen, all would be over, his father’s secrets revealed. Kyo scowled, thoughts drifting back once again to the bane of his existence. Obvious danger aside, what was his father thinking, taking up with her? Sure, she was pretty enough, young, well-liked, kind and the whole package, but any woman who demanded he set his clear heir aside for her unborn child wasn’t as pure as they made out to be. This one had ambition, and something else that Kyo didn’t like - some emptiness in her gaze that was only the kissing cousin of tranquility.

Kyo had seen right through it, but no one would listen. She reminds me of Shouko, his father had said once. And that was that. Nothing would gainsay his father when it concerned his dead wife, not even the threat of his new wife discovering that that the king’s progeny was more numerous than previously expected. So Kyo had bowed down, promising he’d raise the kid, and never let anyone know it wasn’t actually his. And he had. For years he had, learning to be careful for someone else’s sake, and taking those extended trips away from the castle in order to map out alternate plans. He wasn’t stupid, after all. Someday this would all come crashing down, and he - and by extension the kid as well - meant to come out on top.

There were now muffled sounds of discomfort coming from the sack, and he patted it once again, lingering a little. He hoped he was reassuring the head, and not a similarly rounded body part…

His thoughts shifted with ease, slipping into a more pleasant vein. Kyo was not, surprisingly, a lecherous man. He figured it was the byproduct of his upbringing, and the lingering caution of losing his control over his power and setting any partner aflame. It had been harder than he’d expected to imagine a fitting woman to act as Soutarou’s hypothetical mother, just in case the queen ever caught wind of his existence. In fact, the only woman he’d ever touched with any
intention at all - and even then it was a fleeting, barely there kind of moment, and he’d promised himself that he’d lost his head after falling from that damn pirate ship - was the rare kind. The memory of touching her face had stuck around uncomfortably long, aided by the somatic recall of her body crushed against his as he’d hurled them from the ship, and then again as he’d carried her like a bride from the waves to the camp. Yet it had been what had given him the idea of using her as a stand-in for the boy’s mother...and all that entailed.

Not quite knowing how the new queen’s power worked, he’d practiced keeping his father’s secret by etching an imaginary encounter into his brain until there were moments when even he had to question whether or not he’d seduced her by the campfire, or he had let her slip into healing rest. He’d relived every word and glance and spark of sass until he felt as if she were a living, breathing presence in his life...even though he hadn’t seen her for almost a year.

Kyo winced. It was probably that which had forced him to think of her now, and made him so unaccountably awkward about doing so. Not that the girlie would ever know that, at least. No one ever knew anything about him that he didn’t offer up himself, especially not a moment of sentimentality, or weakness. Everything would be fine as long as he kept this interaction businesslike, as he should have done the first time. Here was his chance to banish her ghost and to live his life the way he meant it to be lived.

If the quiet, oft-ignored sentimental part of him whispered that all this was the only way he’d get to see her again, he steadfastly ignored it. It was the part of him that delighted in his fantasy rendezvous with the rare kind not for the imagined carnal pleasure, but for the romantic gestures that even he could not banish. It built upon the real, making it difficult to push aside. Touching her face and watching her eyes flutter closed became the precursor to a deep kiss, her quiet hum as he used his power on her became a moan of longing when his hands trailed down. The trust in her gaze when she had bid him goodnight, her breath hitching as she called him partner...

Kyo stood still, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. He couldn’t think about this now. Not when Soutarou was in such poor condition, and the woman in question was struggling on his shoulder.

“Mrnfh - mf phwaw. Let me down!”

Kyo chuckled. Although he had suspected she was awake for the last half mile or so, now she must have gotten at least one hand free to work the gag loose, spitting out the rag in order to make her demands. That was perfectly fine with him. They were nearly at the cabin now, and he was perfectly willing to bet that no matter how angry she was with him for enlisting her aid in this manner, she wouldn’t turn down a chance to help an innocent boy.

Even if she did, he was fairly sure he could convince her.

Without warning, he swung the bag from his shoulder, being careful not to smack her head against anything. He set her down gently on her feet, giving her time to find her balance. Then he set her free, using a small tongue of flame to burn through the sack, making her a hole she could shove down past her hips. As soon as her head cleared the top of the sack, he gave her his best, roguish smile. She would never know it was a bit wider and more natural than usual.

When she saw him her eyes widened, and her barely concealed fear turned to honest anger. “Kyo! You - it - I...Oh for heaven’s grace. Did you just kidnap me?”

Oh, he hadn’t realized just how much he’d missed her until she was sassing him. “Yep.”

Rather than immediately attempt a verbal response, Rin threw her hands in the air and fixed him
with her sternest, non-nonsense expression. Kyo worked very hard not to laugh, or find her adorable. That failing, he tried with better success to keep either expression off his face.

When she found her voice, she was slightly more coherent. “You can’t just do that, Kyo. My partners are going to be frantic! They’ll think I died, or was captured...you know why that’s such a big deal!”

Kyo shrugged. “If it makes ya feel better, I’ll let ya go right after we’re done.”

She smacked her thighs in frustration. “Kyo! That is not the point! You should have just asked! Or let me leave a note!”

He sighed. Way too much trouble, and not nearly as exciting as stealing her away in the dead of night. Maybe he could distract her. “Ok, ok. Next time. If it helps, I’ll let ya have one free hit. Take it or leave it, girlie.”

Rin’s eyes narrowed, and by the speed she went from enraged to calculating he realized too late that he may have made a mistake. “Just one?”

But it was too late to take it back now. With her, at least, he could be a man of his word. “Just one.”

She nodded, looking grim. He prepared himself as she brought her arms up into position - unless she was left-handed, it was looking like a standard haymaker - when not for the first time she surprised him and kicked him with startling speed and force right between his legs.

He bit back a groan of startled pain, but couldn’t deny the urge to hunch over. Just a bit. Damn, but the woman had a strong, bony foot! And there went all his half-developed fantasies of her. Now if the queen ever got ahold of him, he was sure she’d be seeing this. He breathed deeply, forcing down his annoyance and the pain. Girlie was speaking, saying something about responsibility and how friends don’t go kidnapping other friends, Kyo, but the first thing that really punched through his discomfort was when she asked what the hell she was even doing here, Mr. I Traipse Around the Kingdom With Women in Sacks?

“The boy,” Kyo rasped out unthinkingly. Damn, but his equipment still hurt and it made him a little less canny than he usually was. “He’s ill. He needs help. I don’t know how to make the fever break, and he’s had it for two days now. Ya said your mother was an herbwoman; that ya knew healing herbs. Do ya know how to stop a fever?”

The rare kind quit her bitching to blink in amazement. “Well, yes. Of course I do. But just about everyone knows that. Every healer in the kingdom, certainly. Why do you need me?”

Kyo shook his head and straightened, ignoring the twinges of pain in his nether regions. He was never allowing anyone a free hit ever again, not even girls. “Need ya ‘cuz you’re a rare kind, girlie. His power’s the problem. Kid can’t keep still. Flashes right through the fucking walls if he’s not hemmed in. I’ve trapped him in the cottage, but he’s not gonna’ get better surrounded by my flame. If ya can keep him in one place long enough to heal ya’ll have done what no one else in the kingdom could do.” He took in her wavering expression and awkwardly tried to sweeten the pot. “Sides, the kid’s real cute. All big eyes and smiles. Ya’ll like him. His name’s Soutarou.”

Rin gave him one of those looks that Kyo was fairly sure he could recreate in his dreams, he knew it so well. Then she sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Ok. Ok. I’ll need to see him, obviously, and stay with him, but I’ll also needs herbs and water, and a fire to boil some tea.” Reaching into one of the many pouches in her pack she pulled out a few dried herbs along with one fresh sample. She
handed them to Kyo. “Do you know these plants? If you can fetch them for me, I can focus on healing Soutarou. The faster he’s healed, the faster I can keep Ryoutaro and Takashi from losing their minds over me.” She shook her head and then turned and began walking to the cottage.

Kyo glanced down at the herbs, recognizing them. He began to think back to where he’d last seen them, fairly sure it was somewhere within this very woods. Yet just as she reached the door she turned back and called to him one more time.

“Kyo? Is there anything else I should know?”

He didn’t mean for his gaze to flicker away, or to nervously lick his lips. It’s not like he was ashamed of the boy, or anything, or even the circumstance leading up to his impromptu adoption. Yet for some reason, telling the rare kind all this made him uncharacteristically hesitant. Still, she was bound to find out some time. Might as well be now, no matter if that made his gut feel as tight and as uncomfortable as it did when she’s kicked him. “Well,” he unpromisingly began, “maybe.”

Then he paused, trying to find the right way to word this.

Rin frowned, impatient to get to her patient. “What is it, Kyo?”

He shrugged, going for nonchalance. “He’s my son.”

Rin entered the cottage in a stupor, mind swirling with shock. Kyo...had a child? Kyo? The king’s illegitimate heir had a child of his own? The same man who had massacred the dread pirate and his crew, and then launched them from the blazing wreckage? Somehow, his being a father was harder to grasp than him kidnapping her for help. Yet why else would he bother to kidnap her at all? With how lackadaisical his parenting appeared so far, would he care even the slightest bit about someone else’s child?

Rin bit her lip hard enough to taste blood. And where was the child’s mother? The woman Kyo had made the child with? Oh gods above, did he have a wife? Or had it been a concubine? Or just some woman out there, clearly not taking care of her son or Kyo? Because otherwise why would he need her?

Yet her rising rage was quickly tamped down by what lay within the cottage. It was sparse and unfinished, with barely enough room for a woodsman’s kitchen and two cots, and a table. Upon the cot ringed in hellflame lay a young boy - no more than five, and small for his age - and the sight of him made Rin’s heart plummet into her stomach. Even through the flickering blue flame she could see how ill the boy was - she would have to move quickly to staunch the fever in one so young.

Kyo entered the room, and Rin found she couldn’t look at him. “I’ll need a kettle and a path through the flame,” she informed him in clipped tones. “After that I’ll need dry blankets and more herbs. Cool water will help, as well. Can you provide that?”

He hummed his assent, and then proved himself immediately useful by turning and plucking a
kettle from the cabinet behind her. Rin did not meet his eyes when she took it from him, thus proving herself a weak-willed fool.

Yet there was no time to reflect on her newly-realized idiocy. Knowing the boy’s life relied on her moving quickly, she fell into the rhythm of her tasks, moving surely and leaving her no time to think. Within minutes she had a kettle boiling on the fireplace, thankfully lit with normal flame. The tea was thus prepared, and with one glance at Kyo - and his subdued expression caused her heart to swoop right back down into her belly - a small curtain of flame drew back, allowing her to reach the boy on the bed.

Soutarou, she reminded herself as she drew near. The boy was blameless and her patient, and now she was close enough to see the beads of sweat and hear his chattering teeth. As she approached she set the kettle on the floor, reaching out to wipe the sweat from his face with a clean cloth. His eyes opened as she did, squinting at her and then beyond at the eerie reflections of the blue light dancing on the walls.

“Papa?” He whispered, “Did he come back?”

Oh, she was going to kick him again for leaving his child, even if it was to get help. “Yes, he’s here. He brought me to help you, Soutarou. You will be well soon, I promise. But you need to drink some tea for me, all right?”

Even though he was seriously ill, the boy tried to smile at her. “Thank you, ma’am. I like tea. I like you too. Even if you feel like air.”

Rin’s brow furrowed. His incoherency worried her - if the fever had reached his brain, there was very little she could do. Yet she would still have to try. All the while keeping one hand on him, she poured a large cup of tea one-handed, and then helped prop him up to drink it. Thankfully he was able to drink on his own, and downed the cup in 4 large gulps, piping hot though it had been. At the first gulp Rin had been worried, thinking he might burn his throat, but after the second she realized it was a foolish fear. If this was Kyo’s son, surely he could handle a little heat?

She had him drink a second cup, and this time the mixture of feverfew, blessed thistle, peppermint and valerian had the boy blinking sleepily in short order. The febrifuge herbs would help combat the fever, and the valerian would help him rest, although Rin had to admit Kyo’s impromptu method of sweating out the fever may have been slightly more beneficial than she’d suspected. It certainly hadn’t seemed to harm the boy, and his temperature was lower than she had feared.

“Ma’am?”

Rin found that smiling down at Soutarou was painfully easy, even knowing his parentage. Kyo was right. She liked him already, even in such circumstances. “Yes, dear?”

“Who are you?”

She dunked the cloth in the pot of cool, clean water Kyo had passed her through the flames. She wiped down his face and chest as she responded. “My name is Rin. I’m...a friend of your father’s.”

Soutarou’s eyes lazed at half-mast, clearly trying to stay awake just a little longer. His little mouth twisted into a smile. “Thank you, Miss Rin. Papa says thank you too.”

Rin didn’t pause in wiping him down, moving onto his arms and legs. “It’s my pleasure, dear. You just focus on getting better, and then we can meet properly, ok?”

The boy hummed, but his eyes flickered closed. Rin continuing wiping him off, planning ahead. He
probably hadn’t slept this well in days, and she was determined that he would sleep well with no interruptions as long as he could. That meant she had to postpone her altercation with Kyo until his son was out of the woods.

But then she would let him have it.

The wall of blue flame fell, and Rin turned, careful to keep one hand on him. Kyo stood lounged against the wall, one foot bent at the knee in a position of disinterest, yet his worry was palpable. The knowledge of this made her throat constrict. So. This was what Kyo looked like when he loved someone, and was afraid of losing them...

“How’s he look?”

He didn’t look at her as he asked, and Rin felt the rage she’d felt upon discovering her kidnapper bubble up, this time aided by the fact that Kyo had a son. It made her foolish, but after the day she’d had, wasn’t she entitled to it?

Yet he was also a worried parent, and her anger was personal. She would not let him worry unduly about his son. “I believe he’s out of the woods. I’ve given him the medicine he needs, and will continue doing so every few hours. Your method of keeping him here may have helped, in that regard. Some healers swear by sweating out a fever.”

Kyo shrugged, but looked a little relieved. “That’s what I always did. Figured it couldn’t hurt the - my son.”

His hesitance about naming the boy as his own fueled her annoyance. Now was the time for the needle of her revenge. “It’s still a serious matter, Kyo. His mother should be told. Actually…shouldn’t she be here?” Rin asked innocently, glancing back at the boy on the mattress. It wasn’t that her courage failed her, exactly. She just couldn’t look at Kyo right now that she’d talked about another woman, was all.

Kyo made an odd huffing sound. “That would be difficult.”

With her characteristic impetuosity, Rin leapt to conclusions. She could see it so clearly: the mother was some nancy, weak-willed noblewoman, who cared more for her social status than the health of her child. Or worse, married to someone else. She was also, Rin’s imagination unhappily decided, probably delicate and beautiful like some sort of doll. Rin inwardly seethed and her grip on the boy’s leg inadvertently tightened. “Does she not care enough about her son to come? No matter the circumstances?”

There was a beat of quiet, and then, “It’s not…she died in childbirth.” Rin looked at him in surprise and his mouth tightened, as if even he realized just how shocking his blunt admittance was. “It…was a long time ago.”

Rin responded automatically, mind whirling. “I…I’m sorry. I should have...have realized.” Her eyes fell, and she chastised herself silently. Like an idiot, she had allowed her jealousy to blind her, keeping her from seeing the truth of the situation. If there had been a mother in the picture, Soutarou would most certainly be with her, rather than languishing in this woodland cottage. He would have been surrounded by physicians and loved ones, not at risk of dying alone under Kyo’s care.

More so, Kyo would have never needed her had there been a mother still in the picture. She should have known. Before Kyo she would have read the situation in a heartbeat. What had he done to her, to make her so foolish and blind?
The only balm to her humiliation was that he sounded just as uncomfortable as felt. “Well it ain’t like I ever told ya. It wasn’t something I ever thought I’d need to.”

Rin was unsure how to take that. She had no idea how to feel either way. She shifted on the bed so that she could run her hand up to Soutarou’s stomach, checking his body temperature. It was still high, but he was sleeping so peacefully… She turned back, willing herself back to her duties. “Does he have any clean clothes? Now that he’s resting I’d like to change him, and finish wiping him down. Will you help?”

Kyo nodded, wordlessly turning to the cabinet beside the one that held the few kitchen supplies. She readied the cool, wet cloth as he returned with not only clothes but a towel as well. He helped her undress him, and then held him up as she cleaned him, murmuring quietly to him when the boy shivered at the touch of the cool water.

When they finished she toweled him off, and Kyo flipped over the thin mattress. After redressing him, Kyo laid him down gently. For a moment their faces were close together, and Rin found herself observing aloud, “Does he favor his mother, then?”

Kyo froze, although Rin found nothing so odd about her question. He finished laying the boy down and took more time doing it than she suspected he needed. He didn’t respond until he straightened, looking down at his son. “Actually, he...well, we both favor the king. It’s...to do with our bloodline. When we’re young we all look like Soutarou. It’s only as we age that we start to look a little different.”

Rin looked up at him, trying to find the similarities between father and son. She couldn’t. It was almost as if there were none.

Kyo recognized her look and grinned. “You’re not gonna’ find the resemblance. You’ve never seen my father - I don’t like a blessed bit like him, either. Yet when we’re kiddos, we’re all like little identical twins running around...it can be a real mess when there’s more than one in a generation, apparently.”

Rin narrowed her eyes at him, sure he was putting her on. He edged to the other side of the mattress, the boy sleeping in between them. “If you all look exactly the same when you’re young, how do they keep you apart?”

“Our powers. Only the first born has the flame. Everyone else has their own specialities, and there are never any repeats. Then by the time ya hit puberty it doesn’t matter - ya look the way you’re meant to. Not that it matters now. There’s only one in every generation so far, so there’s not going to be any confusion.”

Rin hummed, looking at Soutarou thoughtfully. She took in a deep breath, finally able to smell the pine of the forest and woody, musty smell of the cabin, rather than the glassy, smoky, unnatural scent of hellflame. Another thought occurred to her, and she decided this may be the best time to learn everything she could. Kyo was in a talkative mood, it seemed, and now that she was no longer so stupidly angry at the thought of there being a woman in Kyo’s life, she could handle the situation normally. “Does...does your father know about Soutarou?”

Kyo gave her an odd look, much like the one he’d given her after she’d run away from him that first time. “It’d be pretty hard for him not to, girlie.”

Rin frowned at him. “Well, does he accept him?” At Kyo’s continuing confusion, she growled. “What I’m trying to ask is why I’m healing this poor boy in a shack in the middle of the woods, Kyo. Tell me this isn’t where you raise him!” Rin had thought she might be able to raise his ire and
shake him into his normal self. It didn’t seem right that the man who so brazenly kidnapped her could be so hesitant when faced with his family. Or maybe it was her? Either way, she didn’t like it. She wanted the old Kyo back, who charged through life like he had nothing to lose, not this cautious man who looked at her like she might break.

Kyo scratched the back of his head before stretching his arm out, palm facing the ceiling. Rin wondered why until he used his power to create a perfect sphere of blue flame. He stared into it as he spoke, as if it were a locus to center his thoughts.

Rin looked only at him. The threat of his flame did not interest her as much as his story did.

He explained slowly, and somewhat haltingly. The king knew of Soutarou, and for several years had not minded as long as Kyo kept the boy a secret. He could not blame his son for the sin he, himself had committed, and he’d rather have some security for the line than not. Yet then he had remarried, and the new queen had surprisingly not taken to him - Rin couldn’t help but swallow an amused snort - and had demanded that her future children be considered the proper heirs. While Kyo wasn’t worried for himself - he was a man full grown, and there’d be no one else to take over when his father’s reign ended - he was worried about his own child, who was still too young to protect himself. Now that it was more important than ever to keep his existence a secret, Soutarou was being raised by a noble family with a young son of their own, and who lived far enough away from the palace so as not to raise suspicion.

Kyo had only moved him to the cottage because the boy kept using his power to flash away from his adopted family, through walls and into ponds and busy roads. Kyo couldn’t take him to the palace, so he had taken him to his home base - where he stayed when he needed to be away from the palace - the one place where he’d be able to keep him safe and take the needed countermeasures to keep him in one place. It was also the only place, he admitted, that he thought she, as a rare kind, might feel comfortable coming to.

Rin swallowed thickly. That he had been thinking of her to that extent, and not just as a last ditch method of saving his son… He had shown her a surprising amount of trust bringing her here, his home away from home. But maybe it was not surprising at all, she realized, watching him from across the cot, his son in between. Perhaps to him such trust was merited. She could have earned it at any point in their atypical friendship, or by virtue of being a rare kind. It could even have been when she had closed her eyes at the last and called him partner.

Soutarou whimpered and it brought Kyo’s attention away from her. He laid an awkward hand on his boy’s head, slowly smoothing down the sweat-dampened strands. He did not speak to him, did not whisper the soothing words that Rin had heard from so many other parents, yet the desire to comfort him was obvious to one who knew how to look. Rin looked, and saw something she had not allowed herself to dream of in their time apart: love. Kyo loved his son, and now that she knew he was capable of it, Rin knew there was no way to further deny to herself that somehow she felt the same for him.

Only you, Rin, she chastised herself as she watched him stroke his son’s forehead. Only you could fall for your people’s worst enemy - the prince of the realm.
That night, Kyo watched as the rare kind rested, slumbering peacefully next to the boy. Lying together like that they looked like mother and son, and Kyo made himself look harder, ignoring the painful tightness in his chest. This was what he would show the little royal upstart, if she ever tried to read his heart. Not his fantasies nor that kick from earlier, but this: this was real, and it was easy enough even for him to hood his eyes and pretend this was his life, his home, his family.

Especially when he could no longer deny that he truly wanted this - this woman, this child, and more than ten minutes of peace at a time.

He watched them for a minute more, eyes lingering over the way Soutarou clung to her. Boy was going to be a little charmer when he grew up; nothing like he had been. He had an innate sweetness that if Kyo ever possessed had been beaten out of him at a young age, scrambling for safety amongst the palace nobility. He’d had no protection then, and his father had been half mad with grief and disappointment. He’d had to fight every step of the way, relying on himself alone to secure the position he now held. Soutarou would never know that kind of life, and Kyo was proud of that. He wanted to preserve the kid’s innocence as long as he could, wanted the kid to laugh and smile every damn day, and the way things were now, he was just managing it.

Kyo frowned, looking away from them. That, however, was soon to change. He carefully unrolled the missive he had picked up only minutes before borrowing Rin from her trade caravan. His contact at the palace was young, but one of the most capable men Kyo had ever had the fortune to meet - and his talents as a spymaster was unquestionable. Kyo had never even seen the man’s agents, but they got the job done every time. Yet the current message was dire: the demons were growing restless, and villages were falling at exponentially faster rates. The king did what he could to outwardly quell the spread, yet the true cause of the demon invasion remained unaddressed.

Now, the spymaster informed him, he had even more worrisome news. He had himself witnessed a demon meeting, led by one of the seven kings of hell. He had only ventured close enough to determine their next target: the locus of the ritual that had brought them to Takama ga hara all those years ago. While he was unable to determine exactly what that locus was - or even if it was an object or a person - he was devoting his full attention to discovering it and moving it to safety.

The spymaster ended every missive with the same plea: The wrong must be righted. Our kingdom must be saved. Are you prepared to do so?

Kyo had not yet said yes. He knew what it meant to do so, and who would be called upon to strike the final blow. While he knew it was the right thing to do - the kingdom would certainly fall apart if he could not find the strength - he still hesitated. History would not look kindly upon him if the full reasoning for his actions was not known, and he might never forgive himself for destroying someone that he loved. He feared the weight of the sin he would commit to keep them all safe.

Even knowing that his actions would save the kingdom, he could not forget that it would also spark an irrevocable change. Would the people be able to adjust and accept a new era? Or would they find his ideas and plans shocking and unacceptable?

The sound of movement behind him shook him from his thoughts. He leaned back behind the cabinet, watching the girlie through the empty space of a removed drawer as she shifted carefully on the cot, checking the boy’s head and stomach. She smiled briefly before leaning down to pour another cup of the herbal tea. She roused Soutarou gently, murmuring something too quiet for him to make out, before having the boy drink the tea. She stroked his hair as he did so, and Kyo thought she’d look at her own children with that exact expression.
Kyo glanced away. That expression was dangerous, and made him want things that he couldn’t...he shouldn’t-

Soutarou’s voice was not as quiet as hers, and carried to his hiding place. “I’m glad you’re here, Miss Rin. I like when you take care of me. Do you take care of Papa too?”

Rin’s response was too quiet for Kyo to make out, but just the thought of her caring for him made flame crackle behind his eyelids, and a strange, swooping hope grow in his belly.

“Hmmm. Thank you for being his friend, Miss Rin.”

Kyo couldn’t help but look. Rin whispered again - he thought it might be sleep, dear - and then gently kissed the boy’s forehead as she tucked him back down to sleep. He turned and huddled his way back into her arms, and Kyo watched them until they both fell back asleep.

He watched them throughout the night, his thoughts chasing across the landscape of his dreams. He had dreamt the same dream since he was a little boy, but it was only within the last year that it had begun to shift - little changes here and there, augmenting without marring the whole. Now, in the pre-dawn darkness of his cottage, watching a woman he should have killed on sight cradle his secret, illegitimate half-brother, he found that change had come like a forest fire, burning all but the rafters in his palace of dreams.

When morning light broke, he penned one word in response to his contact’s plea. Yes.

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Although she had trained herself to wake early, Rin did not awake until almost midday. She woke to the smell of stew, bubbling merrily atop the small, blue fire - Rin wondered, blearily, at Kyo’s setting a normal fire the night before. Yet then she glanced down at the boy in her arms, who was squirming in discomfort, likely from the heat of her body or her limbs holding him down. Rin smiled as she laid a hand to his forehead, and then his stomach. He was cool - the fever had passed.

The door opened and Kyo walked in, glancing at the fire before he brought his eyes over to them. Rin’s heart fell to her stomach at his stern expression, yet after a moment she bit her lip and made herself look closely at him. He would be gone soon enough, after all, and no matter how painful her feelings were for him, it would be worse when he wasn’t there for her to see.

“Good morning,” she murmured, and the sound of her voice made Soutarou turn on the bed, his own eyes blinking open.

“Good morning, Papa,” he seconded, rubbing away the sleep with his little fists. “I’m all sweaty, and I can’t go zoom.”

The matter-of-fact way Soutarou had of announcing his mild distress kept Kyo from returning their morning greetings, but it also made his lips twist upwards. With the briefest glance at Rin - that
made her breath catch in her throat at its intensity - he reached down and plucked his son up from the bed, hoisting him over his shoulder. At the boy’s squeal of delight, this was no unexpected mode of transportation. Rin could only shake her head as Kyo played with his son, heading towards the door.

At the door he paused. “Bucket for you, girlie. We’ll be down by the stream. Call out when you’re done.” All this was said without looking at her, and Rin glanced over at the bucket sitting by the fire. He had warmed water for her bath? Her heart was too full for her to thank him with her usual strength of character, but he nodded at her quiet thanks, regardless.

She bathed quickly, and all the jumbled thoughts of last night gave way to sensation. The coolness of her skin, the smell of smoke and sickness and herbs, the rhythmic motion of the water she poured over her limbs. She suspected that it was her heart’s way of protecting her now that it finally understood itself.

Rin dressed herself and called out for them long before they returned, and she thought that his taking so long was Kyo’s quiet way of expressing that unexpected propriety. Soutarou was clearly on the mend, and he tried to his best to chatter happily all through breakfast. Yet by the end of the meal he was struggling, leaning heavily against Kyo and blinking wearily. Rin hid a smile as she served him the last of the medicine. It was just a precaution at this point, but it would also help him sleep, which the boy clearly needed to do.

Minutes later they had laid him out on the cot, fragrant herbs burning in a little pot on the windowsill. It would give him sweeter dreams, Rin had told Kyo, and he had lit it without a word. They returned to the fire, cradling their bowls of stew and tried very hard not to look at each other.

Kyo’s history filled her mind, leaving her as full of his voice as if he were actually speaking. Yet there were some things that should be discussed. She set aside her bowl with a sense of determination and then began. “If Soutarou is no worse when he wakes I think I should leave by nightfall. My partners will be beside themselves, and if I’m gone too long they’ll be unable to keep my disappearance a secret. It might be...problematic if my...family finds out we met again.”

Kyo glanced at her, a sharp look from underneath stern brows. “Probably not as problematic as mine, girlie. But I get ya. These are troubled times. Plenty o’ bandits for ya to run into on the roads this time of the year.”

And in two sentences he had given her an alibi while quietly reassuring her of his ability to keep her a secret. Her heart swelled with something like hopelessness and it loosened her tongue into asking an unexpected question. “Kyo...do you want to be king?”

He sighed heavily, almost as if he had expected her to ask. “It’s not up to me, girlie. Not really.”

“I’m not asking about what will happen. I’m asking about what you want.”

He gave her an odd look at that, as if there was any difference. Perhaps there wasn’t. But then he looked down at the stew, and slowly but surely began to open up, speaking in his natural accent. “It’s not about what I want. There’s just nothing else I’ve ever thought of being. I’ve known my entire life this was what I could do. What I should do. I’ve seen the changes that need to be made, and I’ve made myself strong enough to make them.”

He glanced over at Soutarou, sleeping peacefully on the bed. “You think his life is hard? The illegitimate son of the illegitimate heir, hidden from the queen and fostered in a home? I had nobody to foster me, nobody to hide me. I had to learn it all the hard way, all the while getting stronger, and staying alive. His upbringing was the first change I was able to make, the first person
I was able to protect. When I’m king, how many more will I be able to save? How many others can I keep from starvation, or from corruption, or from poverty? Ending the war is just one part of it. The rebuilding is going to be so much harder, but thanks to my...non-traditional upbringing, I’m the man who’s going to knit this realm together.”

He gave her a look then, and his speech slid back into its rustic vernacular. “And ya know ya got nothing to fear from me, girlie. I ain’t afraid of ya or your people...not like my old man or his advisors. And when I gain the throne maybe it will be time to show everybody else how stupid we’ve all been for fearing ya rare kinds all this time.” He glanced away as he rolled his shoulders in a show of unconcern, but there was a quiet vulnerability in his gaze that made Rin’s heart turn over.

Rin was a little stunned by his determination, so different yet so akin to the expression he’d worn when he’d dealt out death to the pirate crew all those months ago. She scrambled for something to say, just to keep him talking. “You would make a strange king, if you sought to connect our people...”

He laughed quietly. “Gonna’ be an odd king anyway. I have a feeling my methods will go over big with the general populace...but not the noblemen. I don’t care who’s who and how rich or popular or important someone is - if they’re interesting I like them, and more so if they’re useful. Or sassy. Like some rare kind trader I could name.

“Besides, not many kings ascend to the throne with a kid in tow, and no need for a queen. They’re not gonna’ like that part either, but what can ya do?”

Rin’s brow furrowed. Of all the things he’d said today and last night...did he not think she would understand what he had told her? Or had she misunderstood? No, she couldn’t have. Yet then why would he continue on as if she didn’t know?

It was hopeful thinking, but maybe he was avoiding the heavy truth of the boy sleeping on the cot behind them because he didn’t want a wife. At least, not a wife who could be queen of the power users. But that was only wishful thinking. Even if they were friends and he trusted her with what was most important to him, that didn’t mean he wanted to marry her.

So with a heavy heart she continued, gauging him for a reaction that might set her straight. “But of course you will. Need a wife, I mean. Or at least a child of your own. Someday. Unless you don’t mind passing the throne onto someone without your fire.”

Kyo handled it masterfully, she would admit. He didn’t even freeze before shooting her an exaggeratedly confused expression before glancing over at Soutarou. But before he could respond Rin shook her head.

“You said it yourself last night. Your heir will have the flame - it’s that direct descendancy to determine the next ruler.” She swallowed when faced with a blank expression that she knew hid his utmost attention. “You’re...not his real father, are you? And if you’re going through this much trouble to keep him a secret, I would guess he’s your brother...and therefore the king’s son. But if that’s the case, how do people not know? If he looks identical to you, or the king, but his power isn’t flame...?”

Kyo remained silent, simply watching her. Rin grew flustered under the intensity of his stare.

“What? If I can see it so will everyone else! So unless this is one of those changes you’re going to implement when you’re king, it may be something to be aware of-”

“Does it matter?” The words were hushed, yet the power of his gaze was not. It made Rin’s
stomach flip, and wonder what it would feel like for him to whisper to her like that alone in the dark. “If I’m not his father?”

Her heart skipped a beat and the surprise of it made her honest. “Not to Soutarou.” She breathed deeply, not breaking eye contact. “Nor to me.”

The light in his eyes flickered at that, but he said nothing. For a long while she thought that might be the end of it. Yet then he set down his bowl and glanced down at the floor. “I wish I had someone like you when I was growing up,” he admitted, and his self-consciousness made her head spin and heart swell, and made her say something that might be unwise.

She stood, heart pounding against her ribcage. She held herself perfectly still as she looked at him, wondering if everything she had never known that she wanted was within her grasp. “You have me now, Kyo,” she whispered, forcing herself to meet his gaze when it snapped up to hers.

Her heart kept up its deafening, incessant rhythm in her chest while slowly, oh so slowly, he stood. He took one step towards her, and then another until he towered over her, a dizzying amount of muscle and determination and hellflame, contained in the body of just one man. It was almost fearsome, but Rin remembered that flash of white light in the clearing and did not worry for her body, although she couldn’t help but fearing for her heart. He kept his expression so glacially blank, save for the burning of his eyes. Rin wasn’t sure what her own eyes reflected, but if it was even a tenth of what she saw in his…

Slowly he brought his fingertips to her cheek, tentatively touching the soft skin. Her eyes fluttered closed as he brought his other hand to the back of her neck, trailing his warm fingers down the pale, slender column. Even with her eyes shut she could sense him leaning in, bringing his heat close to her.

And then, just before he kissed her, he whispered her name. “Rin.”

Rin’s lips parted in surprise and that was when they came together. He kissed her so softly, so gently, as if she were something too precious to mar. She had never been touched so, and with such devotion - she felt beautiful and precious, and although her people would never forgive her for giving in, she could do nothing but press her lips to his, savoring each exquisite moment.

His thumb trailed across her cheekbone, and she grew dizzy from both the touch and the warmth of him. Although he could not hurt her with it, his skin was alive with heat, and unconsciously Rin sought to draw closer. She hummed in pleasure when she stepped into his embrace, deepening the kiss as his arms tightened around her for just a moment…

But then he stepped back, only pulling his mouth away from hers at the last moment. Rin sighed as her eyes fluttered open. Had her kiss been not good enough? Was she not good enough? She teetered on the edge of overwhelming disappointment and a faint sense of relief - she was no married woman to know of what came next, after all - when her eyes caught on the hazy desire in his gaze. The longing there shook her to the bone. So she had been enough! Kyo was simply being the most frustratingly honorable man she had ever known, right when she didn’t want him to be.

She wanted to step towards him but her feet were planted to the floor. So it was up to him to take another step away from her, and then another. Finally, before he reached the door, he exhaled harshly and glanced to the side. It took him two tries to speak. “Might...might not be a good idea to wait for nightfall. You might want to get a headstart. If you follow the path behind the house it will lead you to the trader’s post.”

Rin’s heart fell to her feet. No, she couldn’t leave now! But...if she didn’t leave now, when would
she leave? It would be too easy to let their passion burn them alive. Yet it wouldn’t burn him, she reflected. It would hurt her so much more to have him and then lose him...

He swallowed thickly. “Just...wait for a minute or two before you set out. I have...I have something for you.” That being said, he backed out the door, and Rin was struck with the sense that she had somehow scared him off. Yet he had liked the kiss just as much as she! His current actions denoted that perhaps he liked it even more! Rin shook her head in frustration, and scrubbed the back of her palm against her cheeks. Stupid man, stupid prince, stupid Kyo. Now she felt like crying, and that was something she would not do in his presence!

So she walked mechanically toward the bed, grabbing the small bag she had with her when she was kidnapped. She kissed Soutarou’s forehead and whispered goodbye, and he mumbled something incoherent in return. Judging that had taken the requisite minute or two, she walked outside to see Kyo waiting for her, head bowed, fingers fiddling with something at his belt. She took each step with deliberate precision, trying to keep her expression as calm and as understanding as she could. Her pain was her own, and Kyo had enough of his without hers added to it.

Rin reached him sooner than she wanted, but she had very little way of prolonging the inevitable. She thought that he might not even embrace her in goodbye, and that was a bitter disappointment among all the others of the morning. So she waited for him, looking up at him as intently as he watched her, waiting for him to do what he must.

Finally he moved. Without looking away from her, he reached down and unhooked an ornately carved knife at his belt, one that Rin had never seen him use before. He held it out to her until she closed her fingers around the hilt, and only then did he explain.

His words were quiet and serious, the kingly voice with only her nickname to soften it. “You’re good at getting into trouble, girlie. Take this with you and don’t be afraid to use it. Especially if you’re captured by some other power user. Tell them Kyo gave it to you freely, and it will make them pause.”

Rin shook her head, too choked up to immediately speak. “No,” she finally forced out.

That brought a tiny smile to the very corner of his mouth. “No, what? No to getting caught? Or-”

She shook her head again. “I won’t use it. Well, I won’t get caught either, but neither will I show it to anyone who could hurt you.” She tightened her grip around the knife, and tried to smile. “It’s all I’ll have of you, after all.”

She did not look up at him as she said it, and therefore missed the determination that flashed in his eyes. Yet she did not miss the cautious fingers that tipped up her chin, nor the steadiness of his voice when he spoke.

“A knife is a poor gift, Rin. Yet for now it’s all I can give you. But if…” He trailed off, glancing away quickly before forcing his eyes back to hers. “But if there comes a day when I could give you something else...would you take it?”

Between the pain pressing in on her and the power of this moment Rin couldn’t understand. Yet even just him asking set her alight with longing for it. “I...If it’s from you, I doubt I could say no. But I don’t understand. What day could possibly come?”

For a moment she saw a world of possibilities - of chaos and order, of desire and discipline - in his eyes. Then it gave way to the sensation of his thumb along her jawline, touching her with that same reverence he’d displayed earlier.
“I told you I’d bring change, Rin-”

She smiled up at him sadly, breathless at his whispered intent and her feelings for him. “And can you change the kingdom, Kyo?”

His eyes fell to her mouth, and there was time for one last whisper before he leaned in to lay one last chaste kiss upon her lips before letting her go. “Just you watch, girlie. I’ll change the world.”

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He had promised to change the world. Yet the next time she saw him, he had set the world on fire, instead.

Chapter End Notes

Well that took forever. My apologies to anyone who wanted Code:Emperor to be a heartless badass but I am a hopeless romantic and wanted to give him inspiration of the female persuasion. Also, Ogami needs parents, ok? (Not that he was made in this chapter. They’ve got a ways to go, yet. The kingdom has to fall, first…)

And I so overestimated my ability to finish this fic in a timely manner. In my defense, I finally finished my first original novel, although it’s nowhere near good enough for the real world yet. Still! At least I’m writing, hey?
As Eden’s medics wheeled Yuuki and Maka into the hospital - Sakura following dutifully behind - Rui watched out of the glass windows of the helicopter and wondered if she’d ever see them again. It was not a morbid wondering, rather a matter of her upbringing when she had made peace with the notion that every foray could be her last. Besides, they hadn’t been in this much danger since Eden had fallen, six years ago. Especially if what they faced could do such a number on Yuuki, whose strength had grown a staggering amount since then.

Rui was honest with herself and knew that Yuuki was much stronger than her at this point. Her power was subtlety rather than strength and even in her Empress Paradox form she could not wreak as much damage as the younger Code:Breakers could. Yet she was not the Protector Goddess for nothing, and it was ultimately why she had acceded to Toki’s demand to switch teams. This way, she would be able to protect that good-for-nothing Shibuya...and the man she hopelessly, begrudgingly loved.

The line of her thoughts tugged at her heart, and as if her eyes and heart were connected, her gaze fell on him. He sat in the seat ahead of her, next to Shibuya who had demanded - quite vehemently - to pilot the helicopter. Something about bucket lists, although he hadn’t said any more than that. His head was leaned back, flyaway curls spilling over the headrest, shoulders taut with tension. The forgiving part of Rui wanted to bring her hands to them and knead away the tension, as she had done once or twice as a young girl hoping to cull favor with the man who raised her. Yet those times had been long before she had realized the depth and enormity of her feelings for him, and especially with things as they were now, she could not reach across the distance to touch him, no matter how slight the distance may be.
Rui breathed deeply as the helicopter lifted off, spinning in the air in the direction of the long-lost island. She had been somewhat incredulous that no one had found it in the last century, but the ancient arts - both from the power users and the rare kinds that had sought refuge there - that had long protected it still held strong. Shibuya, who had a better idea of the sacrifice enacted by the rare kinds to protect their home, thought it might outlast their current civilization. After all, it had already lasted thousands of years, stemming from the time before the rare kinds were worshiped and idolized, and their subsequent fall from grace.

While Rui was unconvinced, she at least trusted that there was immense power on the island, even if it had lain dormant for the last hundred years. Perhaps it was something in the magic of the island’s protection that called to the demons and dragons even now-

“Ksshhh. Toki to Ru, do you copy? Toki to Ru - over.”

Rui rolled her eyes before tapping the nyanmaru styled transmitter on her left ear. “Yes, Toki. I hear you.”

“Response not registered - please respond in code, over.”

Now she full on growled, and the sound of it caused Kouji’s head to tilt towards the left, towards her. Yet he stopped the movement before he could glance over at her, and it made something hot slide down Rui’s throat. “Toki,” she growled. “What do you want?”

He must have registered the danger in her voice as he suddenly switched into his normal vernacular. “Zed wants us all to connect to the common channel - says there’s a few more things we should know before we touch down. Can you get Kouji and Shibs to turn on their transmitters?”

Sighing, Rui did just that. “Hey, Shibuya. Turn on your transmitter.” There was a beat of silence where she struggled with herself to address him as well. “You too, Kouji.”

There was even less warmth in her voice than when she had addressed Shibuya, and even Toki caught it. “Woah, damn. You’re frosty today. Save some for the baddies, yeah?”

Rather than respond Rui simply switched her transmitter to the common channel, where she now could hear Karin and Zed talking quietly with what sounded like Sakurako, over in the third helicopter. At Shibuya’s thumbs up she spoke up. “I think we’re all on, now. What was it that you guys wanted?”

Karin was the first to speak. “Well, we’ve got a few hours before we reach the island and the story is almost done...and to be honest, we have a few suspicions about the identity of the um, puppeteer that we didn’t quite get into. We were thinking we could finish the story - at least that which pertains to Kouji, Takehiro and Rui before we land. Sakurako? Kouji? What do you think?”

There was a beat of silence before Sakurako piped in. “In terms of final battles, Zed and I didn’t figure too strongly in that one...that being said, Kouji should probably start. Most of the story seems to be from his perspective, anyway.”

Kouji gave him a pained look and although she was angry with him, it still made Rui’s heart clench in sympathy. And then, for the first time since Zed had made a move on her, he looked back at her.
His dark eyes fixed on her with such a stark intensity that for a moment she forgot how to breathe. Nor could she remember how to modulate her own expression, which she was sure must reflect her helplessness when it came to her feelings for him.

Yet he said nothing. He simply looked at her, and then away, raising one hand to adjust the transmitter he wore.

When he spoke, his voice was that low growl that made her shiver with hastily repressed excitement. “The field marshal’s gift was not what I had expected…”

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Kouji stared down at the blade in his hands, puzzled. The blade itself was fine, well-crafted and deadly, but the inscription that Takehiro had claimed was important…? Well. Emblazoned across the hilt of the blade in tiny, flowing script was this: *No higher honor than love*. Kouji’s head cocked to the side as he considered. Unfitting as the reminder seemed to him, something about the blade seemed almost blasphemous, as if it were encouraging him to put love above those he was sworn to: family, country, and king.

Surely Hideyoshi had not meant it that way - it must connect more personally to their conversation about his hopeless love. Yet that did not seem quite right either. After all, Hideyoshi denounced his love, giving to her only a poem. If he were to take his own advice, would he not have addressed and fought for his love?

Something else, then. As it was, Kouji had no further ideas as to the full meaning of Hideyoshi’s gift. It was all he could currently do to hold to his personal strictures on honorable behavior in the midst of this untenable situation. This was what he had ultimately decided, and Hideyoshi had known this.

Kouji sighed as he sheathed the blade. Hopefully there would be time when all was done to query the field marshal on his gift. For now, he would simply be thankful for the blade’s quality, and focus on what needed to be done now. The sun had risen several hours ago, and he could no longer hide out in his chambers, buying Karin more time to escape out to the army, which had left half an hour after he and his comrades had finished their briefing.

Takehiro had moved with the army, and would ostensibly fill in Fujiwara on all that needed to happen. Karin had slept for a few hours, recharging herself so that she would not succumb to further sickness or her lost state. Yet she too had left almost an hour ago, and now it was time for Kouji to end this charade.

As soon as he revealed himself, however, the king would know what had happened, and that Karin had broken her promise to him. But he could not in good faith leave Hikari alone any longer. He would simply have to take up his position protecting her, and deal with the king’s anger when it came. Karin and Takehiro already knew not to return to the palace under any circumstance, and in the worst case scenario would wait for him in Japan. This did leave him totally responsible for
protecting Hikari and stealing the box...but it was the only way they could see all of them escaping Takama ga hara and fulfill the king’s demands while doing so.

That was...as long as all of them survived.

Brushing aside his sudden misgiving, Kouji strode out into the hallway-

-and a surge below his feet promptly threw him backwards into the wall. Kouji hit it hard, nearly dropping his new blade as he slumped down to the ground. After gauging the wind to assure that he was alone in the hallway, he stood, groaning. What was that? An earthquake? It seemed too sudden and sharp to be so, however... He pushed off down the hallway, in the direction of Hikari’s chambers. Whatever it was, she would no doubt be worried. He needed to reach her and make sure she was safe-

The floor rumbled again, yet not quite as violently. This time, Kouji was able to keep himself upright by throwing out an arm and catching the wall. He closed his eyes and focused on the wind, searching for minute ripples along the floorline which would denote the tremors of an earthquake, but it was as he feared. There were no residual tremors, and this was no earthquake.

His thoughts flew to the earth dragon he and Takehiro had faced, but he couldn’t be sure. He had been asleep when the first rumbles had begun, and had only experienced one moment of seismic activity before the dragon had leapt forth. If a dragon had reached the palace the destruction would be total. And this time, there would be no rare kind to help him face it...

Kouji pushed himself faster, now racing through the hall of the palace, desperate to reach Hikari. Damn him for taking up quarters on the other side of the palace! If only he’d kept his regular quarters, he’d be there by now! As it was, he was only just coming upon the throne room, in the dead center of the palace. Praying that he would not be too late Kouji pushed himself harder, racing at full speed. Yet as he came upon the throne room the scent of smoke pierced through his purpose and made him proceed more cautiously. An earthquake was one thing and a dragon quite another...but fire in the palace, when the king held absolute dominion over the most hellish version of that element?

A bolt of blue flame shot across his path, missing his head by scant inches. Kouji hurriedly ducked, and his mouth ran dry. Never in all his years had he seen the king use his hellflame in battle. It was rumored that the king was far too powerful to do so, yet now there was another worry - his mental fragility might give his opponent an opening. For the king to have deemed it necessary to enter the fray matters must truly be dire.

Duty demanded that Kouji make his way to Hikari’s chambers, but his concern for his sovereign - deeply ingrained enough to override his disapproval of his callous treatment of Karin - won out. Cautiously he ducked into the throne room’s antechamber, straining his ears against the sudden silence. It was then that he heard something that made him pause: a quiet voice carried through the door by his mastery over the wind.

“Your reign is over, Father. For the good of all the kingdom, it is time to pay for your sins.”

It was Kyo. Bewildered yet infuriated - how could Kyo move against his father, and at such a perilous time? - Kouji thrust open the doors without a second thought for his safety. Yet his body was not ruled by his amazement, and in this his discipline won out. He launched himself to the side on instinct, and it was just in time to see twin streaks of hellflame rush by him, incinerating the very air where he had been standing.

He glanced up quickly to gauge his next move, and before his eyes lay a throne room he had never
before imagined. The room was very nearly destroyed, the pressure and heat of the hellflame having destroyed the sumptuous furnishings as well as wrecking the room’s stability. Yet most worrying was the wall of flame bisecting the room in two. On the far side with the dais stood Matsuhiro, looking every inch as exhausted as he had when he had denounced Fujiwara. On the other, closest to Kouji, was Kyo - tall and strong and looking every inch both madman and king.

He caught Kouji’s glance for just a moment before gritting his teeth and sending another bout of hellflame through the wall’s sapphire sheen, which his father directed away just in time, his exhaustion evident.

The timing was too perfect to be anything other than engineered - a political coup just when the kingdom was at its knees. *Kyo must have been aligned with Fujiwara all along,* Kouji belatedly realized, for a moment reeling in the epiphany. *No wonder Hikari had mistrusted them.* Then his sense caught up with him, and his rage won out.

“Kyo!” He roared. “End this madness! Would you tear this country apart just for your personal ambitions?”

They were at so little a distance as to make Kyo’s muttered aside audible, even with the cracking and squealing of burning wood and twisting metal. “*And so the disgrace begins. What would she think, could she see me now?*”

Then the heir turned to him, simultaneously addressing Kouji and sending arc after arc of cobalt flame towards his father, attention split perfectly between Kouji’s expression and his father’s weakening attempts at deflecting the barrage.

“There is nothing political about this, Shihoin. I’m saving the kingdom. If you don’t have the stomach to watch, go after your cousin and make sure she doesn’t bring the dragon down on our heads!”

Saving the kingdom? *Dragon?* Kouji had thought Kyo to be a man of (somewhat dubious) honor but never had he thought him a liar. Nor crazed. Yet either or both he must be to spout such nonsense while attempting patricide.

It was futile to reason with him. Without a thought for anything other than his country and his king, Kouji’s priorities realigned. Hikari was his cousin, true, but he could not let the injustice before his eyes go unaddressed. Kouji lunged forward, withdrawing his new blade as he went. Yet Kyo was not the premier warrior of Takama ga hara for no reason. Without missing a beat he unsheathed his own blade and rose to the challenge.

Unlike their spar before, however, there was every possibility that at the end, one of them would be dead.

Their blades crossed with a shock that tingled down Kouji’s spine, and for the first time, Kouji learned what it felt like to fear another man’s resolve. It was not just the force of Kyo’s swing nor the barely leashed talent straining to be released, nor even the thought of death that made his stomach drop. No, for once more than his own personal safety relied on his winning this bout, and it was when he faced an opponent that he knew he could not defeat.

If he lost here, Hikari and the king would die. The kingdom would fall. It was the thought of failure at such a scale that made his heart freeze in his chest.

The two men tore apart, both flicking a glance at the king, who watched behind the curtain of flame. He was clearly exhausted, and pushed to the point where endurance snaps. Yet he was not
the King of All Earth for nothing. Kouji bet that if he could give him an opening, he would take it, even if it meant striking down his son and tentative heir. Recognizing this he charged forward, raising Fujiwara’s blade for a deadly slash.

At the same time the king shot forth a wall of flame, passing through his protective barrier. It was a perfectly timed two-pronged attack and for a moment, Kouji thought that it would be enough. Yet that same protective instinct that had him dodge at the doorway had him stay on the defensive even as he thrust down, and it was all that saved him when Kyo suddenly erupted.

For a moment Kouji thought he’d set his entire body alight. All was flame and steel and Kyo’s wild smile, and Kouji was pushed past his bearings to parry his attack. This was beyond his ability, and death was before him. But before Kyo could land the killing blow, he was suddenly gone.

Kouji blinked and took a step backwards, eyes tracking around the room. How had…? Where had…?

A quiet gurgle caught his attention, and his eyes snapped to the king. There the mystery of Kyo’s disappearance was revealed. The king had just sank to his knees, clutching the sword that had pierced his heart, blood dripping from his palms as he attempted to turn the blade into flames. Yet the sword held true by the will of the man who had stabbed him. Kyo leaned over his father, expression impossible to read through the flickering blue flame.

Kouji stared, horror flowering at the pit of his stomach. Kyo had managed to surpass his father’s flame and land a hit - and if the sword wasn’t turned to flame, the king would die. “Kyo!” He roared, but the man in question simply shook his head, staring down at his father who looked up at him with betrayed eyes.

Kyo spoke, although not to Kouji. It was quietly and for his father only, but even as the room was falling to pieces Kouji strained his ears and his hold over the wind to hear every word.

“Your deal with the demons is done, Father. You’ll be with your beloved wife again soon. You should never have tried to revive her - you should have known better than trying to trick the demon kings.”

Matsuhiro choked, blood gushing past his lips. “I…regret it. But Hikari is…victim too.”

Kyo sneered. “I don’t believe you, old man. She was their puppet, their curse. She was your punishment for your arrogance!”

“No,” Matsuhiro whispered. “You were.”

There was a moment of silence before Kyo growled, “It doesn’t matter. It’s over. Whether you knew it or not Hikari has fallen. The demons corrupted her and now she controls the dragon Asura. But when you die, the demons are banished from our realm. One dragon won’t destroy the kingdom. I’ll make sure of it.”

Matsuhiro no longer tried to dislodge the sword. He simply gaped up at his son, pale and weak as he died. “No. You will end the kingdom. Wait until you know love. You would burn the world for it…”

Kyo pulled back then, an odd expression on his face. It was in that moment that Matsuhiro died, the light flickering out of his eyes. Without Kyo to hold him up he slumped forward, impaling himself further onto the blade. Then his entire body burst into flame, and even behind the protective barrier, Kouji was forced back from the awesome heat.
As he watched in sorrow, the flame seemed to grow even hotter…in horror, he realized that the wall of flame was now advancing outwards, no longer under the king’s control. If it continued its outward movement, it would sweep through the entire palace, destroying all…!

“Kyo! You must bring down the flames!”

Kyo looked over at him, and Kouji was stunned to see tear tracks on his cheeks.

“It will destroy the palace!”

After a moment Kyo nodded and brought up his hand to dispel the flames.

Yet just as he returned the fire back to the hell from which it came, a mighty tremor shook the palace. Both men were thrown from their feet, and with an eruption of noise a large portion of the ceiling unmoored itself. Sparing only the briefest glance upwards to gauge how much was falling, Kouji shot himself backwards to the door, riding the wind in order to escape certain death.

He could not see if Kyo was so lucky. The ceiling fell between them and the walls began to cave immediately after, and his vision of the dais was blocked. So would be the final resting place of Matsuhiro, King of All Earth…and unless he proved himself invincible once again, his son, Kyo.

For a moment Kouji could not move, stunned by all that had happened. The king was dead, and at the heir’s hands...such a thing had not even been attempted in the kingdom for a thousand years!

Yet Kyo had cause, apparently. His father had not denied the charge of dealing with demons, and if it had been his fault for the attacks…

...and what had Kyo said about Hikari? That she controlled the dragon?

That snapped him out of his reverie. There would be time to figure out the truth of this later, as well as to mourn, and if necessary seek revenge. For now, he had to reach his cousin!

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Making his way to Hikari’s chambers was difficult enough with the failing infrastructure of the palace, but progress became frustratingly slow when he stumbled into impromptu battles on the way. Although he had been able to sidestep the first two, Kouji had just finished breaking up the third pitched battle between Matsuhiro’s guards and (Fujiwara’s? Kyo’s?) rebels when he heard a familiar yell.

“Show no mercy, Zed!”

The children were here? Kouji groaned at the thought of protecting them as well, but found himself racing towards the sound of Sakurako’s voice. When he saw who they were fighting, however, he slowed down, hiding himself behind a pillar. Their opponents were too powerful for him to put down with brute force - he’d have to await an opening if he wanted to get the children out alive, and soon.

Heike Masaomi and his silent shadow, Yukiha blocked the path to the queen’s chambers, but that wasn’t the most immediately worrying aspect. Sakurako was noticeably lagging, although her battle spirit was high. Yet only a day ago she had been bed bound, and Kouji would be surprised if
she wasn’t minutes away from losing her special power.

Zed, on the other hand, was clearly on high alert, doing all that he could to keep the fight away from her. Yet there was little he could do against two such powerful users. Although only a few years older than the children, Heike had made a name for himself with his battle genius and his incredible hold over the power of light. As for Yukihina, even from his vantage point Kouji could feel the strength of his special power emanating from him. He too would be a force to be reckoned with. Together, they might someday be unstoppable.

Regardless of individual strength, Heike and Yukihina fought together with an admirable connectivity. In a less desperate time he would have enjoyed watching their interplay, and been a little jealous at how organically they fought together. Yet there was no time. In desperation, Kouji’s eyes flitted around the makeshift battleground and his mind shifted into higher gear. How could he use his power to tilt the odds in the children's’ favor?

After another tremor shook the ground, Kouji had an idea. He brought all his strength down on a sagging beam holding up the east wall, and with a jolt it gave. Propelled by his wind it slammed down between the power users, cracking the floor open as it fell.

Heike took the advantage to stun Zed with a concentrated burst of light, but Kouji had planned for that. He shoved Zed below Yukihina’s ice barrage just as the floor began to sink beneath their feet. When he realized they were falling, Zed’s first concern was Sakurako - just as Kouji had planned. Zed slid across the tilting floor and reached her just as they pitched forward to the basement, leaving Heike and Yukihina alone on this level.

Just below their feet and out of sight Kouji suspended the children in midair, straining to keep the winds circulating quickly enough to keep them from dropping. Luckily they didn’t fight him, recognizing there was only one power user over wind left in the palace.

“Should we go after them?” Yukihina asked quietly, glancing down at the dark level below.

Heike peered down as well, but then shook his head. “There’s no time. We have to keep moving, Yuki.”

His partner frowned, and his fingers grazed the back of Heike’s hand. “Heike...those children didn’t know about Fujiwara and Kyo...”

Heike sighed and turned back to his partner. “Why should they? Kyo likely didn’t tell them.”

“But what if-”

Heike interrupted him with a kiss, and Kouji nearly dropped his hold on the children. Not only partners then, but lovers?

He knew he was bad with romance, but he thought that no one might have seen this coming!

“You worry too much, Yuki. For now, we have a kingdom to save.”

Yukihina frowned, but nodded after placing a gentle hand on Heike’s face. The two men turned to go, but one last thing occurred to Heike. As soon as Yukihina was several steps ahead of him Heike turned back and sent a flash bomb down the gaping hole in the floor.

“Shut your eyes,” Kouji sent a message on the wind, hoping it would reach the children’s ears in times. “Swathe yourself in darkness!”
Incredible light went off just beneath Kouji’s feet, and in his heart he feared for the children. As soon as the two teenagers were out of sight he raced down to hole in the floor, drawing the children back carefully. He let out a sigh of relief when they cleared the lip of the floor. Zed had his arms and power around Sakurako, sheathing her in death and darkness, protecting her from Heike’s light. They seemed a little stunned, but otherwise were largely unhurt.

After laying Sakurako out on the floor, Zed turned to him. “Thank you, sir. But how did you know to save us?”

“Luck,” Kouji admitted grimly. “But there’s no time. The king has fallen, and the safest thing for you the two of you-”

“So then Fujiwara did kill him? How?” Zed was wide eyed and pale at the discovery, but Kouji shook his head.

“Fujiwara did not kill the king, although I have no doubt he was in league with murderer.”

“Heike and Yukihina were Fujiwara’s dogs,” Sakurako groaned from the floor, too weak to move but not to speak. “They must have known we were loyal to Kyo. No wonder they attacked us!”

“Kyo will never let this stand,” Zed said furiously. “He’ll revenge his father!”

Kouji closed his eyes. He felt the callousness of exposing the children to the truth of the matter when they obviously hero-worshipped Kyo, but it was too dangerous to let them continue on in ignorance. “There will be no revenge from that quarter. Kyo was the one who murdered the king.”

The children fell silent, stunned. For a moment there was only the sound of Sakurako’s labored breathing while they struggled to comprehend it.

“No, that can’t be…” Zed whispered, eyes wide in disbelief.

“He accused the king of bringing down the demons and the king did not deny it. Beyond that I do not have the answers, young friend. And unless we all survive to the end of this, we will not know them. After the war seek Kyo out if you wish. It may be too difficult to trust a man who’d turn to patricide. But if his actions have saved the kingdom…” Kouji shook his head. “I reserve judgement. I am not sure I’ll ever be able to forget, but for now, I must continue on. Can you get out of the palace?”

Zed nodded, absently taking Sakurako’s hand. “Yes. Rako and I have places we can hide. We’ll contact Kyo after...everything is over. I don’t know if we’ll stick around with Fujiwara though. We don’t trust him.”

“No, neither do I,” Kouji admitted. “But it’s a sound plan. If you cannot stomach the snake then send word to myself or my associates. They’re fighting Asura, and may have a better chance of surviving this than I. Good luck, my comrades. I hope that we might meet again in a better time.”

Both children whispered their own good luck and good byes, and then there was only a few hallways between himself and Hikari. Kouji threw himself down them, feeling as if failure itself was chasing him. He had been just in time to save the children, and far too late to save the king. Would he succeed in saving Hikari? Or would she meet her husband again in death?
After all the struggle of getting to her, Kouji should have known something was wrong when the door leading to Hikari’s outer chambers was unlocked. Yet just then he was only thankful. After racing through the palace, fighting off maddened heirs, witnessing the death of kings, and having to console powerful youngsters he was stretched to his limits. He would have to dig deep to find the patience and strength to deal with Hikari now...or merely the ruthlessness to knock her out until all was resolved.

_Whichever opportunity presents itself_, he assured himself. Then he rushed through the door-

only to stop stock still, staring in terror at the tableau in front of him. The carnage caught his eye first. Hikari’s two maids were shoved back against the wall, dangling several inches above the floor, held up by an unseen force. Blood had sprayed from their mouths with gushing force, staining the walls behind them and pooling at their feet. Their hands fell slack at their sides, horror glistened in their unseeing eyes.

There was not a wound on them. Whatever had killed them had done so from within, and to his sorrow, Kouji knew just who the perpetrator had to be. There was only one person left alive in the room, after all, and while grieved, Kouji was glad that he and Karin had switched places.

He would never have her be faced with her own sister’s depravity.

The queen sat on the bed with her back to him, hunched over what could only be the damned box. Yet as soon as he took a step towards her - cautiously, as he wasn’t quite sure how her power to read minds had manifested itself in murdering her two maids - the box began to glow. Kouji froze, but the glow intensified. As it built he felt an odd presence in the air. Some force was moving against him - unseen, yet certainly felt.

Kouji understood immediately. _This_ must have been what had killed the maids. With no way of sensing it, it had made easy prey of them. Not so he! Still, that moment was all the warning he had before a wall of that unknown presence bore down on him, with enough force and speed to make him nervous.

Kouji internally swore. Give him a foe he could see, could fight! He slashed, but weapons were useless against it. So he evaded it through the wind, twisting and ducking with supernatural speed to avoid its bone crushing grip. Yet although he was fast the magical force was faster, and very quickly he found himself pinned in against the door.

“Hikari!” He called out, hating himself for this but seeing no other recourse. “Do you wish for me to die? The man you _love_?”

To his surprise this penetrated her disassociation. “No,” she whispered, and suddenly with a scream, she threw the box down to the floor.

The box appeared to shatter when it hit the ground, and the force that threatened to crumple his ribcage like paper suddenly abated. Yet every ounce of Kouji’s concentration was now on his cousin. As soon as the box had left her hands the glow had suddenly grown ten times brighter, bathing her in an eerie green light. Strand by strand her hair began to rise away from her face, and her arms fell slack against her body.

All this was bad enough but Kouji’s heart froze when she rose from the floor, suspended by nothing he could feel - not the wind nor the force from earlier. He called out to her, but it was too late.
With a sudden flash, all the colors in the room turned to their opposites. It was like looking through a mirror darkly into a nightmare, and only his love for his cousin - not what she wanted, but what she had earned - kept him there. Come what may, he would not abandon her to this horror.

Now he could see whole new aspects of the room that had been invisible to him before. The maids were stabbed through with spectral swords, gleaming with multicolored hellflame. Their blood was painted around the dark walls and in long, white swathes; a slashing language that Kouji could not read. Underneath Hikari was something he could decipher, however. She was directly above the center of a huge blood pentagram, augmented with bone white symbols that filled him with horror.

Kouji hadn’t believed him when Kyo had accused her of controlling the dragon. Matsuhiro and the demons he could see, but Hikari? He had always considered her as too pure and weak to be a threat. Now he saw all too clearly how wrong he was. Here was magic beyond his ability, and from the feel of it, thoroughly steeped in evil.

Cautiously, Kouji took a step closer to his cousin. As he did so he could hear whispers at the edges of his hearing. Her mother’s voice came in and out of focus, murmuring snippets of sentences that meant little to him: Don’t look at his past then, you stupid girl, and I’m doing what is best. Then it was his voice: I’m sorry, cousin. I cannot love you in that way. Then Karin’s: Of course I love you! I- Hikari, what is wrong? Why are you…?

More chillingly, the king’s: Open your legs, dear. Didn’t you promise?

Kouji shivered. Were these her fears compounded? All but his made little sense to him. He shook his head. It was too late. If he got her out of here alive he could ask, but for now he had to focus on saving her...and if Kyo was right, saving them all.

He stood below her, looking up. The box was back in her hands as if she had never thrown it down, and for the first time he could see her face. Her eyes were open and blown wide with despair. The sight made Kouji hesitate. He had assumed she was unaware for all of this, possessed by whatever powered the box. Had she been conscious? Was that how she had been able to save him only a few moments ago?

He would return the favor. He would not let her die. He could not fail her now, even if he had no idea how to save her…

“Hikari,” he said quietly, feeling foolish but needing to do something. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” she whispered, although it was not her own voice. Not entirely. It was overlaid with other voices, a melange of masculine and feminine that sounded even more distraught than she. “Kouji. Help me…”

“How do I help you?” He circled her carefully, looking at the markings on the floor to see if there was anything he could recognize. Yet all the symbols were strange to him, and he had no idea what rubbing one out would do - would it free her? Or would it kill her?

“Kill me, cousin. Then I can be saved.”

“No!”

“You must,” the otherworldly voices pleaded. “Else the dragon shall destroy us all!”

Kouji’s blood ran cold. So Kyo had been right about Hikari’s connection to the dragon? Yet how was that possible?
As if she had read into his mind - and with her power it was entirely possible - she answered his question. “Asura...is not from our world. It is from the netherworld, and it is the true pet of the demons. The markings on the floor- they are what control Asura. I...I am what powers the gate that brought it here.

“You must kill me, Kouji. The dragon cannot remain here without the gate. Yet as long as I am alive the gate cannot be unmade. Please, cousin. If you cannot do this, the dragon will destroy our home!”

Kouji gaped up at her, stunned by both her coherence and the import of her message. Yet he couldn’t just kill her - not when he had struggled so to find a way to save her! “How did this happen to you?” he asked, stalling for time to think of an idea.

“In my sorrow I opened the box,” she responded sadly. “And then my heart was lost. Please, Kouji. We don’t have much time. On how many legs does a table stand? I can feel the dragon and its power grows with every hour...!”

Her face twisted in a grimace, and blood bubbled up from the corner of her lips. “They’re fighting it. They have a chance...but if I’m alive the dragon won’t die. Please, cousin. You must strike!”

Kouji thought of Karin and Takehiro at the front lines with Hideyoshi, perhaps battling Asura at just this very moment. Were they in any more danger than Hikari? Although he had chosen them over her, that had been necessary. They did not deserve life more than she!

No, there needed to be a way to save her, to keep all his loved ones alive and well...!

Hikari interrupted his thoughts by tipping her head back and screaming, blood trailing down the cheeks, dripping onto the floor. Now her eyes were filling with it, the whites turning red. The box glowed brighter, and she gasped for air.

“Please, cousin. If you cannot love me...do this one thing for me. Let me die. Set me free.”

And what if he was wrong? What if he held the key to stopping the war forever? He had killed others before. Anyone else in his position would not be hesitating. So why was he?

He looked up at her helplessly, even as she dipped down a foot lower. Now she was within striking distance. The end would be quick and clean this way, there would be no more suffering. She looked back at him, sorrow and fear in her damaged eyes. “Please,” she begged him one last time. “I would have it be you that killed me. Give me that much. Please, my love.”

Kouji blinked rapidly, not knowing why his eyes were wet until he felt the tears dislodge, trickling down his cheek. As if in a trance his arm raised. He stared at it, not understanding how his body could move when his head had not commanded it, nor stop when he wished it to. Yet that incomprehension vanished when he found himself assuming an offensive position that lent itself well to slashing upwards.

Even if his mind could not strike her down, his heart could. For the good of the kingdom, he would end this war.

Kouji roared, giving himself over to his battle joy. Yet there was no joy in this moment - just a madness that hazed his vision and clouded his mind. Focusing his intent until it was as sharp as his blade he had time to remember Fujiwara’s inscription - No honor higher than love. Had that been what Hikari was motivated by? Or was it what motivated him even now?

Kouji lunged forward, driving the blade between her ribs. As soon as sword pierced flesh, the room
exploded with a white light. It grew in intensity until there was no world beyond the absence of all color, and unable to withstand it, Kouji’s consciousness folded inwards upon itself and he knew no more.

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Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dunnnnnnnn

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So yeah. It’s been a while. But here’s a holiday update! The best kind, as you can eat a cookie AND read the update. How awesome is that. Oh and don’t get me started on the egg nog. If you are of age, I suggest adding rum and cinnamon in tasty amounts. Ugh. Want it right now.

Go for me, friends. Imbibe and be merry!

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Next chapter: Death is chosen, Asura is brought down, and the war ends...for better or for worse.
The End of All Things Part II

Chapter Summary

In which end comes for both friend and foe

Chapter Notes

So...it’s been almost a year. How about an update? Just in time for Halloween!

Also, I added one line to the last chapter, because I plum forgot it: On how many legs does a table stand? Remember that? Good. It’s in there now, and the plot hole has grown considerably smaller. Hooray!

Lastly, in case you liked my original characters, I’d pull out the hankies. The crying starts now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It didn’t take long for Karin to find the army. The entirety of the king’s forces had marched forth under Fujiwara Hideyoshi’s command, infantryman and special power user alike. They left a trail that stretched for miles, and for once, it was harder to find Takehiro. While annoying, it made sense. With all these new power users bolstering the size of the army, he would be making a greater effort to lie low and not garner attention.

But now of all times he would not be far from Fujiwara’s side. Karin aimed for his tent, and after making her way through the endless lines of soldiers, using the wind to augment her speed, she finally spotted Takehiro’s tent just as the army bedded down for the night.

As she caught her breath she shifted her grip against the sword of death, held in place by the scabbard of life. Fujiwara was not going to like her presence here, no matter how hard Takehiro had worked to convince him. Yet it was necessity. Both of them believed this. Together, they could do just about anything, even though Takehiro had expressed a few quiet concerns just before he had left with the army earlier that morning…

No ruthlessness. Not like last time, he had commanded her, gripping her shoulders.

But I thought that was needed!

Not today. Promise me, Red.

We’re fighting a dragon, Takehiro. The king of dragons. If this isn’t the time for ruthlessness, when is?

This time there’s no Maka or Kouji to save you. So you have to be more careful. When she had opened her mouth to argue further, he had cut her off with, I’m choosing you and Kouji over my people, Red. I’m throwing over my entire way of life, and betraying the trust of a village. That’s
because you two are my family, now. So don’t make me regret this. He gave her a halfhearted wink. At least, not right away. Give me a couple years to get sick of you guys, all right?

There had been little Karin could say to that. She had promised to be careful, squeezing his shoulder as a way of saying a silent goodbye. He had left with his assurances that he would talk Hideyoshi around, making him see that her on the battlefield was an acceptable alternative to no Kouji at all.

The field marshal won’t like this, Takehiro had warned her. Then, his quiet certainty had made butterflies erupt in her stomach. Logically, she knew that the field marshal wouldn’t like her presence when they went up against the dragon because she was a woman, and he a male who could not quite rid himself of his chivalry.

But if she allowed herself to dream of anything else…? Taking into account the erratic beat of his heart just before his brother was condemned, and the charged look he had given her when the king had sent him away before their own interview, would not a normal woman hope, even if just a little?

Karin shook her head. She was not a normal woman, not by any means. Not by power, by upbringing, nor by her physical characteristics. And regardless of what he felt - if he felt anything at all for her - she was leaving the kingdom. There might not even be time to say goodbye to the field marshal. She and Takehiro planned to flee the battle as soon as the dragon was brought down.

Karin swallowed thickly. The thought of never seeing the field marshal again made her stomach crumple and her eyes sting. What happened to her resolve to let him go, to be ruthless with herself? To leave the memory of him behind her on the shores of Takama ga hara? It had all come undone in the events that had followed. Somehow, Fujiwara Hideyoshi had carved out a place for himself in her heart. She doubted she would find another to fill that space so quickly…

First things first, however. She paused just outside Takehiro’s tent, manipulating the wind within to tug at his belt. After moment and a quiet curse, her friend poked his head outside.

“You had to arrive when I’m not actually wearing the pants, didn’t you?” He asked, waving his trousers in his hand.

Rather than blushing, Karin merely gave him a small grin. “It seems my timing has improved,” she joked.

He narrowed his eyes at that - terrible man, he always wanted to embarrass her - before he motioned for her to wait. When he emerged from the tent he was fully clothed. He looked her over impassively, eyes lingering on the sword. “Be careful with that,” was all he advised her. And then, a moment later. “Red, there was a slight change of plan.”

“Oh?”

He winced. “I didn’t…exactly tell Hideyoshi you were coming.”

She froze. “Why not?”

“It - something came up, and the right time never…” He trailed off, and his expression grew queasy. “Red, I’m not sure you should fight. Maybe it would be better if you stayed behind and protected the field marshal.”

“We’ve been over this, Takehiro. This is my reason for being here. This is why I came to Takama ga hara! And I can do this. If I use...you know, I have a chance that you and Kouji do not!”
He nodded, but from his expression she could tell he didn’t agree. “It’s not that I think you can’t fight. I…had a talk with Hideyoshi before you go here. I might have been wrong. I was wrong. About a lot of things, but…” He shook his head and tried again. “He won’t let you fight. And I’m not sure I should, either.”

Karin stared at him, and her rising anger made her reply louder than was prudent. “Takehiro, what the hell are you talking about? You agreed to this plan at the palace!”

He grit his teeth. “Yeah, but that was before I realized that Hideyoshi returned your-” He cut off, eyes widening as they tracked to someone just behind her. Too keyed up by their argument to sense with the wind, Karin spun to see the field marshal himself standing just behind her. Upon seeing him, all that Takehiro tried to tell her was lost. There was an intensity to his gaze that made her breathless, and robbed her of all rational thought. This was the full strength of his regard, and when he looked at her like this she could barely feel the wind on her skin or the blood in her veins.

Behind her, Takehiro muttered away, blaming himself for being a fool and expecting Hideyoshi to eviscerate him immediately. But before the field marshal could say anything at all - for there was no arguing with him if he commanded her out of the fight - she bowed low.

When she broke eye contact with him, it was like breaking a string stretching taut between them. For a moment she felt like running, so neither man could see how upset she was. Instead, she said, “I have come in Kouji’s place. Please command me as you would he. I…” She swallowed, forcing out what she should say, not what her heart clamored for her to. “I would be honored if you would allow me to fulfill my destiny, and to face the dragon Asura.”

She held the bow for what felt like minutes, tension ticking away inside her skull. Takehiro’s silence from behind her made her especially nervous. Finally there were hands on her shoulders pulling her up. She rose, and the only thing she could see were Fujiwara’s eyes, dark and brimming with an unspoken grief.

Such an expression made her weak, and for a breathless moment, she thought he would embrace her. But his hands fell to his side, and after turning his gaze away from her, all he said was this: “Do not die, Karin. If you did, Maka would never stop weeping.”

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“This is how we met,” Takehiro told her hours later, with only a trace of his normal humor. “Fighting together against impossible odds…”

“Sentimentality doesn’t suit you,” she informed him curtly. After a night spent more in memory than in sleep, the next day seemed to dawn too early, and it made her edgier than she usually was. If only she could forget the way the field marshal had looked at her!

At his downcast expression she softened the retort with, “Don’t worry. We’re family, now. I’m not dying without you.”

“Aww, Red…”

“Besides,” she added. “We’re not even fighting together this time, technically.”
He frowned. “I don’t like that part of the plan. Couldn’t Hideyoshi have figured out something other than you on the front lines, waving yourself around like a dragon treat?”

Karin frowned at his flippancy. “I’m farther away than I should be, and there will be legions of soldiers between the dragon and myself. I’ll barely be effective at all! Besides, your position is no better. If this new weapon is as amazing as Hid- the field marshal says, won’t Asura target that rather than the relatively helpless soldiers on the ground?”

Hideyoshi’s plan was centered around the dragon’s lair. Unlike the other demonic attackers, they knew exactly where Asura rested. She had openly staked out a deep ravine at the shoreline of the ocean, leaving herself open to attack on only one side.

The army would engage the dragon in the traditional way, bottlenecking the open end of the ravine. Of course, such a maneuver would not stop the flying creature, but to deal with that was the crux of Hideyoshi’s plan: a new, experimental weapon developed by one of the king’s scientists.

“Yeah well, I don’t exactly like that part of the plan either,” Takehiro mumbled. The ungainly looking contraption was in essence a cannon, yet how it worked was beyond either of them. Glass tubes spiraled around a thin epicenter, much too small to load any sort of cannonball...or anything other than small rocks! But the scientist had already given one demonstration, where merely by cranking the cast iron handle at the side, he was able to generate enough energy to fling a small pebble fast enough that it felled a tree nearly thirty feet away. When loaded with diamonds, the hardest substance on the island, it would be enough to rip through the dragon’s scales.

The demonstration had been impressive, but Takehiro was upset that he had been chosen to man one of the machines. It was the most sensible placement for him, a man with no power at all. This did not keep him from whining about it, as Karin learned during their march to the ravine.

“Who’s going to keep you from doing something stupid if I’m at the top of the ravine, and you’re at the bottom?”

Karin gave him a look. “Who’s going to keep you from losing your weapon this time?”

“Ouch, Red.”

She tried to smile, but her attention was several hundred feet behind them, where the field marshal made his way, surrounded by a bevy of tacticians and his new guard of elite power users. Once she and Takehiro would have been tasked with keeping him safe, but not today. Due to the lack of Kouji’s presence and the fact that they were to disappear after the battle, the Shadow Unit could not offer to personally protect Fujiwara.

The situation pulled her into two different directions. On one hand, the farther away she was from him, the less nervous she would feel about displaying her second ability. After all, she didn’t want him seeing her laughing wildly, madness seeping from every pore, dripping with blood as she attacked the dragon. Still, the distance between them also made her nervous. If something happened to him, would she be quick enough to protect him?

This worry was new to her. Even though she knew he was the most capable leader in all of Takama ga hara, he’d never been on the battlefield with her before. He’d always been either safely tucked behind her, or fighting another arm of the demon horde.

She tried to set aside her fear. *I will keep him safe*, she promised herself. *And Takehiro, as well. As long as I have them, all will be well.*
It was then that the order came for the forces to split. The ravine was upon them, and Takehiro would now lead one half of the forces that were to use the two experimental cannons, one on either side of the ravine. They were accompanied by archers and distance power users, who would seek to harry and distract the dragon from the weapons.

As the soldiers milled all around them, Takehiro turned to face her. For a moment they regarded each other gravely, but neither said a word.

Then Takehiro leaned in. “*Remember, don’t use your blood for more than a minute at a time. Then take a cool down period. Just like we practiced.*”

Karin nodded. Her hold over her power was still unstable, although it had progressed some since their days training. “If I need to, I’ll try to use the outward form. It’s too late to keep it a secret. Just be ready to run when the dragon goes down.”

They nodded at each other and then turned away.

Neither of them said goodbye.

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The only warning was her shadow. Then, just as men craned their heads to look up to the sky, there came the beating of mighty wings from up above. Following this was a burst of flame, gushing above their heads and into the valley ahead of them.

Asura had come.

Karin had ducked as the dragon flew overhead, feeling through the wind the ripples of an immense body approaching at great speed. Others nearby were not so lucky. Soldiers ahead of her screamed as they caught fire. Yet dragonflame burned them far more quickly than normal flame, and before they could beat or roll out the fire they lit like tapers. With an ungodly screech and the stench of burning flesh most succumbed. Only those with power enough to put out the dragonflame survived.

*Avoid the fire,* Karin counselled herself as she launched forward, dodging the burning, dying soldiers. She was fairly sure she could put the flame out by directing all the wind around her outwards, removing it from its fuel, but she’d rather not test it. Besides, she needed to preserve all her strength to attack Asura directly, only reserving enough to protect the field marshal, or if he needed it, Takehiro.

Now Asura was circling back around. With a terrifying cry, she snapped her wings, raising herself higher in the air. Karin plucked up a spear from a fallen soldier nearby and hurled it with her wind power towards Asura. It was a desperate shot, but until she got close enough it was all she could do.

The spear bounced harmlessly off her scales, and the dragon folded her wings as she dove. Her gigantic maw opened wide, ready to spew forth flame-

*“Fire!”*
Hundreds of arrows whistled through the air, causing Asura to rear back. The army had regrouped and sent volley after volley towards the dragon. The arrows were useless, of course, as there was no chance any normal arrow would penetrate her scales, but it would act as a distraction, for both those operating the new weaponry at the top of the ravine...and for her.

Karin rushed forward, finally in range of attacking the dragon with her power. She cared for nothing else. With just a subtle application of her power, she could misdirect all arrows away from her person, so she ignored the whistle of arrows as they shot by her. Those aimed poorly fell like heavy rainfall all around her. She had determined that her best chance was to still the dragon, giving an opening for the operators on top of the ravine to use the new weapon. So she focused all her strength into thousands of small fingers of air, each thin and sharp enough to startle the dragon. Then, she stabbed them simultaneously over ever inch of Asura’s body.

For a moment, it looked as if it had worked. Asura stilled momentarily, and with perfect timing, that was when the machine on Takehiro’s side of the ravine fired. The missile tore through Asura’s right wing easily, puncturing through the weaker webbing at the center of the wing. The dragon screamed in pain and rage, tucking the injured wing against herself. Then she fought off Karin’s hold and dove, launching herself towards the machine...and the men operating it.

Hoping to veer her off course, Karin launched a concentrated burst of wind towards Asura’s uninjured wing, but it was to no avail. Asura swooped over the ravine, ignoring all of the projectiles and special powers aimed her way in order to destroy the machine that had injured her. At the last moment, she extended her injured wing, and with an astonishing independence of motion, used it to sweep everything on top of the ravine - machine, missiles, men - down the side of the canyon.

Karin froze as she watched them tumble down into the gulley. A few were able to catch themselves, especially those with some sort of power. Far too many fell to their deaths, screaming and wheeling their arms in a futile attempt to delay the inevitable. Had Takehiro been one of the lucky ones? With his uncanny speed and agility, she couldn’t believe he was one of the victims. Yet if he fell, he had no way to save himself, and as a rare kind, would unconsciously repel anyone else who tried to help him...

At the thought of her friend dying, anger beat within her like her heart. Truth be told, she almost felt as if the two were connected. She could feel the blood rushing through her veins just the same as she could her rising rage, which seemed to grow stronger with every pump of her heart.

Ruthlessness, she told herself on a long exhale, even though Takehiro had told her not to. Then she dove back into the fray, determined to bring down the dragon, and if need be, revenge her friend.

Asura swooped towards the other side of the ravine, breathing fire down into the gorge. Karin grit her teeth. Although she was not yet desperate enough to use her power over blood, she had learned from her previous mistake. The dragon was too large and powerful to manipulate with her hold on wind. She needed to focus on where it was most vulnerable: her wings. Now that one was injured, it was making her flight patterns erratic. If she could but cripple the other, Asura would be stuck on the ground, and easier prey for the remaining power users and army infantry.

Karin summoned every inch of her power, standing stock-still on a raging battlefield simply to employ her full concentration. This skill was Kouji’s speciality, not hers. But all she needed was one moment. The webbing between the bones was in some places thin enough for a human finger to tear. All she had to do was rip through those places with her power, and Asura would be helpless.

Just as she reached this determination, however, the game changed. Asura screeched, and it sent a
shockwave rippling through the ravine. Karin had pulled upon her power to cripple Asura’s left wing, but the shock wave reached her first. When it did, it was as if the entire world went still. Her connection to her power felt deadened. She could hear, feel, and sense nothing through the wind. Not even the air against her skin, nor the breath in her lungs. Somehow, her hold on her element had been disrupted, and in that moment, the great dragon Asura turned its wide, black eyes on her.

The wind, Karin belatedly realized. She watched it dive towards her, tucking itself in aerodynamically to fall the faster. It controls the wind. It’s strong enough to cancel my power.

But not all my power, she thought as Asura bore down upon her. Not this. For once, she was removed from all fear. In a move that reminded her of hours of sparring with both Kouji and Takehiro, she widened her stance and clenched a fist. In a pulling motion, she stretched it outwards, seeking the hot, heavy pump of the dragon’s heart.

Just as she found it, however, it proved to be too late. For Karin, in her desperation to target the dragon’s blood, had forgotten about the physical strength of the beast. Rather than rear back in surprise, or breathe flame, Asura stretched out with her uninjured wing and batted away at Karin. Without the augmented warning of her wind powers, the blow took her by surprise. Karin was thrown off her feet, flying backwards towards the mouth of the ravine. Unable to call upon the wind, she landed harshly.

Asura swooped down after her, targeting her like a cat playing with a mouse. Wind knocked out of her, Karin stumbled forward blearily, trying to avoid the next hit. The next blow sent her flying back into the center of the ravine, and she bounced harshly off the ground.

For a long moment, Karin couldn’t stand. At a guess, two ribs were broken, along with her left arm. Although that was perhaps only dislocated. From the difficulty in opening her eyes and the disconnection between her eyes and her brain, probably a minor concussion. She could feel the bloody bruises forming underneath her abdomen, however, and she knew that was serious. Healing the internal bleeding would force her attention away from the dragon, but unless she could stop its heart now, everyone’s chances of survival were severely lessened.

The ground rumbled beneath her, and as she turned her head to the side she saw Asura stamp down with one massive foot only a few feet away. The dragon was grounded, then. That meant those manning the other machine on the end of the ravine had a clear shot at her. Karin struggled to her elbows, then further to a sitting position, but she was too dizzy to stand. She just had to hold the dragon’s attention for a little longer…

Another great foot rose above her, ready to stamp out her life. Yet it gave Karin the opportunity she needed. She squinted up at it, and faster than before hooked tendrils of her power into the dragon’s massive heart.

The dragon screeched, and her foot came down.

Karin squeezed with her power, yet she was too late. She was beyond hope-

Out of nowhere, something barrelled into her, throwing her to the side. Above her Asura screamed, flapping her mighty wings to propel herself backwards. Karin had frightened her by disrupting the beat of her heart, yet her hold had been lost when she had been knocked aside. She had not managed to destroy her.

At least she had managed to buy some time. It took several long moment for her head to clear, but clear it did. Only then did she look back and see what had jarred her, pushing her out of the dragon’s path. Her own heart stopped when she realized it was not a thing, but a person. A man
wearing a high-ranking uniform, and had a very familiar profile…

“No,” she whispered, before struggling onto her hands and knees to the fallen body. “No, please. Don’t be-” But then she was close enough, and could see that it was indeed who she feared.

Fujiwara Hideyoshi lay on the ground, blood bubbling over his lips, his lower body crushed.

“No,” she breathed as she bent over him, beside herself and beyond any consideration. There was no coming back from such a wound. Even if she focused every ounce of her power onto him, she could not keep his heart beating when more than half of his body was broken beyond repair. “No, please. Not him. Not-”

“Karin…” His whisper cut through her sorrow, and she looked down at him in amazement. Although death was upon him, he still clung to life. He struggled to keep his eyes open, fixing them upon her. “Don’t cry,” he commanded her, ordering her even now. “They’ll be…clouded,” he finished abstractedly, and although it was not strictly pertinent - nothing was, not when he was dying, and she loved him, and all hope was gone forever - she needed to know what he meant.

“Clouded?” She asked, before cutting herself off. “No, please, don’t speak. Just - rest. Don’t die. Please, Field-”

The corner of his mouth twitched, as if her tearful babbling meant something to him. “Your ocean eyes,” he murmured, and his own eyes tracked over her face with the slow desperation of the dying. “So beautiful,” he added distractedly. “I’d…never seen anything so beautiful.”


“It was for you,” he mumbled, his attention slipping. With an effort, he brought his attention back to her. “I could not betray my family,” he stressed, energy failing. “But I could not stop loving you. Nor let you die. The world...is not worth living in - if you are not in it.”

He was slipping away from her. Karin could feel his heartbeat slowing. Death settled over him like a blanket. There was so little time, and so for once, she did not second guess herself. She leaned down and kissed him softly; once, twice, her lips salty from her tears. Then she pulled back and whispered against them, “I love you.”

He tilted his chin up, pressing his lips against hers, just once and with the barest pressure. Then, with a quiet exhale, he died.

For what felt like a long, long time, Karin knelt over his body. Now that he was gone, she could feel a great emptiness welling up inside of her. Her mind stumbled over the simplest facts. *He had died. He had loved her. He was gone. He had died for her.*

“He loved me,” she mumbled, not aware she was speaking aloud. She was also equally unaware of the battle raging around her, and at the grievous losses inflicted when she wasn’t demanding the dragon’s attention. There were only two battalions of soldiers left by the time she stood over Fujiwara’s body, heart and mind broken.

By the time her power surged within her, breaking the cuff clean off her ear, her awareness had shrunk to encompass only one thing: Asura had killed her love.

Asura would *pay.*
Takehiro’s first reaction upon being thrown up into the air by a dragon’s wing was *oh holy hell, this is not fun at all.*

It was entirely possible that he was somewhat insensitive to danger, after having personally slain both dragon, demon, and demon king in the past month. Still, his fear caught up with him pretty quickly when the edge of the ravine was suddenly within toppling distance. More so when the all-important dragon-killing machine fell over it moments later.

*Well, shit,* was his second thought. *Pretty sure we needed that.*

Then there was no time for thoughts at all. There was time only for the barest reactions: land as gracefully as he could, leap over the soldier hurtling toward him, ramp off the next two, back handspring over the rush of weapons that cascaded over the edge of the ravine. He spun as gracefully as a dancer, and when augmented with his rare-kind quickness, he stayed atop the ravine when no other soldier could.

Yet that lead to the obvious problem. When he was the only one standing atop the ravine, he was the only one left for Asura to vent her rage upon. There was really only one solution, and he took it.

When she reared back for another blow, he raced straight for her injured wing. Unsheathing one of Karin’s extra bowie knives, he leapt upon the wing, scrambling up as far as he could before she tried to shake him off. Once he reached the junction where wing met body, however, he realized he had forgotten one very important detail.

*Dragons fly.* Even with unwitting passengers.

As Asura took off suddenly, flapping her powerful wings to move upwards, Takehiro held on for dear life. Even then, when she banked sharply he was nearly thrown to his death. Scrabbling desperately, he stabbed the blade into the web of her wing, hoping it wouldn’t simply tear through and leave him hurbling to his doom. It ripped through almost a foot before it snagged on the large bone at the apex of her wing. Takehiro held on as the dragon screamed in pain, flapping her wing in an effort to dislodge him. Yet she couldn’t do so without tearing through the rest of her wing, and her efforts only brought her to the other side of the ravine.

Takehiro eyed the distance. It was close enough that the fall probably wouldn’t kill him...but far enough that he wasn’t quite sure. He’d likely not be in a good state after landing, that was for sure. But he was more likely to *die* if he kept up this crazy dragon ride, so there really was no helping it. Gritting his teeth, he sent up an inarticulate plea to the heavens that he might not die here, and when Asura swooped down to release a scorching breath into the ravine below, taking out myriad soldiers, Takehiro jumped.

The descent seemed to take far too long. In between his mindless, gibbering panic and the heavy expectation of breaking his legs upon landing, he managed to get a good look at the battlefield down below. From this height, it didn’t look to be going well. More than half the army was vanquished, and the remaining battalions had banded together in a desperate bid to hold the dragon’s attention.

*They were all going to die,* Takehiro realized, only a few feet from the ground. *Maybe even he was going to die.*
Then he hit the ground hard, and although he tucked and rolled to the best of his ability, the landing was too much for even a rare kind as powerful as he. The pain was enormous, but not as debilitating as the shock of the impact. He rolled helplessly down a small dip in the ravine, ignored by the panicking soldiers trying to operate the machine. The world swum dizzily, punctuated by growing black spots before his eyes. Unconsciousness sucked him down like a tangible force, and for a long, pivotal moments, he was trapped in a halfway state, neither sleeping nor awake.

The sudden, nearby screams did not wake him, nor did the shockwave of pressurized air against his skin. What finally dragged him back to consciousness was the incredible heat. It was enough to cut through the pain and the discombobulation, and he cracked open his eyes to see a wall of flame only two feet above his face.

*Huh,* he thought dazedly. *That would be the dragon.*

Then, a little more coherently. *Oh shit. It’s torching the ravine. The weapon!*

Takehiro had tumbled down into a little dip in the ravine, and it was that which had spared him from being roasted alive. Although he could not answer for any of the other soldiers on the ravine with him, he hoped that the machine had survived the dragonflame. Otherwise there was nothing he could do to help Red, save jump on the dragon again - which he was *not* going to do again - or by racing down to the ravine to fight it with her.

And by that, he meant run. If the machine was torched, he was grabbing Red and getting gone, because how else could they kill it? Even if they brought down both of its wings, blades couldn’t pierce it, fire couldn’t kill it, and there was no way they could immobilize it in time to construct another power-based weapon that was strong enough to pierce through its scales.

The fire cut off suddenly, leaving Takehiro shuddering on the ground, sweat dripping down in huge rivulets. For a moment he lay there, summoning the strength and the will to stand. *If* he could stand. He wasn’t entirely sure that his legs were unbroken, or would at the least do what he told them to do.

His struggles were interrupted, however, by something that turned the blood in his veins to ice. Cutting through his mental fog was an explosion of power - perhaps the greatest single expenditure of special power that he had ever experienced. Not knowing what it was, or what it tokened, Takehiro found himself scrambling along the torched ravine without thought for his injuries. As it turned out, his legs were weak, but unbroken. It was tricky going, as the ground had turned smooth and glassy from the heat, but when he reached the lip - only five feet away from the machine which, while singed, was still standing - he found the source of the power surge.

It was Red, standing alone in front of the dragon, powered up to an insane degree and screaming her fool head off.

In challenge, Asura extended her wings and roared back.

For once, there was no time to mentally berate the Shihoins for being death-mad, or whatever they had to be to court their own demise so fondly. There was only the bone-deep panic in knowing that if he didn’t hit Asura now, Red was going to be dragon food. The army had been almost totally annihilated, and there was no one else to cover for her. Tearing his eyes away from the tableau before him, he stumbled to the weapon. He prayed it would work. There was nothing else he could do - no time for anything else...

As he frantically positioned the weapon, shoving it hard so that it might swivel towards the dragon. But now the trigger was jamming. The small diamond that it had been meant to shoot was stuck,
and he didn’t know how to fix it! In a panic, Takehiro smacked the side of the machine. Once, twice...and then suddenly it sputtered, and the diamond slotted into position.

Here was his chance. On the other side of the ravine they had only gotten lucky once, hitting its wing. Now, he needed to make a direct hit, otherwise all would be over. It had come down to Red and himself, and they had fallen back on the simplest strategy they had employed while part of the Shadow Unit. While one harried the dragon, distracting it, the other would have to land the death blow.

If either of them failed, both would die.

“Please oh please oh please,” he muttered, before Asura reared back, taking a moment to position herself. She’d done just the same before breathing fire the first time. “Hit the godsdamned thing just do it!”

Faster than the human eye could follow, Takehiro spun the crank. The diamond shot forth with incredible velocity, directly toward Asura. For one breathless moment, Takehiro thought it would be enough. The diamond hurtled directly toward the center of the dragon’s head. If it tore through, it might be enough to kill the beast instantly.

At the last moment, however, Asura tilted her head. The direct shot became a glancing blow, tearing through the front of the dragon’s brain. She screamed harshly, and from the blood running freely over her face was at the very least blinded. Yet while the damage was severe - blood and scales arced high over the ravine - the great wings still flapped, keeping Asura in the air.

He swore, but before Takehiro could reload the machine, a great net of blood rose up from the bottom of the ravine. It hooked over Asura’s wings, and began to slowly yet steadily draw the dragon to the ground. In his injured state, it took Takehiro a moment to realize what that meant: Asura grounded, and a much easier target for him to hit!

He aimed for a second shot, and fired. This time it tore through the dragon’s flank, and black blood spattered down on the ground like rain. The shot made her struggle harder, however, and in her attempt to escape Karin’s blood net she slammed herself against the side of the ravine.

The impact shook the ground, and Takehiro was thrown from the machine. Another slam caused the machine to topple over the edge. Takehiro watched in horror as it tumbled over the cliff. That had been their last chance! Now it was only Red and the dragon…

*Oh fuck that,* he thought, just before he began racing as quickly - if a bit woozily - as he could down the steep path leading down the ravine. *I have had enough.*

***

Even with his injuries, it only took Takehiro several breathless minutes to race down the ravine. By the time he reached the bottom, Asura had been grounded. Karin was obviously wounded, however. She stumbled toward the dragon, and couldn’t walk in a straight line. She was also, Takehiro realized, still screaming. Crying, as well. With a bit of incoherent babbling for good measure.

*She’s lost it then,* he realized. This was not just battle madness. She had used her power over blood too long, and now was stark raving. He had to get a hold of her before she burned out and left herself open to a counter attack. Maybe Asura was injured enough to let them ago? Or maybe…

A glint of steel at Karin’s hip caught his attention. She was pulling out a sword from her belt - a
moment of unexpected awareness, for her. Then he remembered: the Death Sword! He had forgotten all about the sword Kyo’s student Zed had made!

This was a chance to kill Asura, if only Red didn’t get herself killed in doing so. He had to time this perfectly. He had to get close enough to her so that she could use the sword without his accidentally negating its effects, and then grab her quickly enough to bring her back to sanity. Then they had to escape the dragon’s death throes.

Takehiro ran as fast as he could, his arms and legs a blur as he raced across the battlefield. He would make it - he would just make it. Karin shot forward, her movements smoother now that the end was in sight. She sidestepped Asura’s claw, reaching out blindly for her. Then she raised the blade high, hoping for enough momentum to augment her failing strength -

And then something happened that they did not expect. Just as Karin brought down the blade, a brilliant white light shot through the clearing. The late afternoon lit up brighter than the most brilliant noonday sun, and even Takehiro could feel the immensity of the power behind this light. And he was a rare kind - what would it do to Red? What would it do to the dragon? It couldn’t possibly heal her, leaving he and Red as sitting ducks, could it?

Not knowing if it was a good or a bad thing, or what the hell was going on, he stumbled forward a few more steps. Through the pure white light he could just make out Karin’s dark shape falling backwards, her sword stuck through Asura’s neck. He reached her just in time to catch her, and then as suddenly as it came, the light dissipated.

In his panic he pulled her backwards immediately, trying to get them out of range of the dragon’s counterattack. As he did so, he blinked harshly, trying to clear his vision. When it finally did, however, he sat down hard, ignoring the moan of pain from the woman in his arms.

Asura was gone. Although the carnage all around them was unchanged, the great dragon had disappeared. He sat there on the cold, bloody ground in stunned disbelief, trying to make sense of this. The dragon had disappeared? Where did it go? What had that white light been? Was the dragon dead? Or would it swoop back down and attack again?

“H...yoshi,” Karin murmured, but when he looked down he realized she was not aware. Still, it was obvious she was trying to say the Hideyoshi’s name. Hideyoshi, whose banner was no longer flying, and unless Takehiro’s exemplary eyesight was mistaken, was lying dead on the ground only 100 yards from where they sat.

“We’re going to make it, Red,” he said instead, unable to tell her that the man she loved was dead. “Family, right? We gotta’ stick together.”

Karin said nothing, but with her last ounce of strength managed to tip her head to the side. Her eyes cracked open, and Takehiro’s heart stuttered in his chest.

Her eyes were no longer blue. They were black, just as the dragon’s had been.

“F’m’ly,” Karin muttered, and it was the last thing she said for a long, long time. She slackened in his arms, and thus is was that Takehiro Shibuya was the last man standing at the end of the Battle of the Last Dragon.

Chapter End Notes
I am trying really hard to finish this beast, because I have it all outlined and everything. It's hard between original writing and real life shenanigans, and also because I have fallen out of love with this manga. Still, I'm over halfway done with the next chapter, and it's a doozy.

Here's hoping!
The Demon and the Dragon Kings

Chapter Summary

In which Ogami and Sakurako kick some serious demon ass, while the great dragon is faced once more.

Chapter Notes

Just to make this clear, I am going a bit off-canon at certain points, especially concerning Ogami’s parentage. As far as I can tell, we never quite figured out who his actual parents were, but it was also explicitly stated that he is a direct descendent from Code:Emperor, judging by all the paintings in the high school with his face. So to reiterate, I’m having Rin be his mother, Kyo his father, and screw it to continuity. This sort of complicated Dec 32nd, but as I couldn’t figure out wth actually happened then I am not so concerned.

Also, I’m going to do my best to power through these. It’s getting there, but I’m getting hit pretty hard with real life writing/original stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rei had faced down unspeakable evil, and horrors beyond the limits of most people’s imagination. He had thought himself an eminent warrior, but now he realized his training was incomplete. For never before had he withstood Sakurako’s enthusiasm over her daughter, nor the unending stream of Sakura’s baby stories, all from before she was 5 years old.

“And then she grabbed Takehiro by the ears and nearly pulled them clean off his head! The look on his face! Pain, mingled with a deep, fatherly pride! Oh, if only personal cameras had been a thing at the turn of the 20th century. It was priceless, I tell you.”

Rei eyed his companion, wondering both at her inclination for short skirts and tall boots even when tramping through an old forest, and at her inability to just stop talking. “And how did Zed feel about her?” He asked innocently, hoping either to silence her, or needle her into attacking him. At this point, he would take either.

Sakurako was undeterred, seeming not to realize his insinuation. “Oh, he thought Sakura was just the cutest thing. He cracked up every time we’d sit her on his lap wearing that same deadpan expression.” She sighed happily, adding slightly more seriously, “It meant so much to him to have that interaction with her, you know. There aren’t many children utterly immune to his power over death. Even after he got ahold of his ability. Children are sensitive in ways that adults aren’t.”

He had meant to draw attention to her fickleness - even if he didn’t truly think she was fickle; not now when he’d seen how it had been between her and Zed, as well as the lingering respect between her and Shibuya - but a stray thought occurred to him. “So children are more sensitive to special powers than adults? Is that why Pandora’s Box sent 4 children travelling through time on December 32nd?”
“Well, in your and Sakura’s case—”

“We made sense,” he interrupted her. “And Ai, too. He was there. But what Mishiru? Why did she come?”

“She was there too,” Sakurako pointed out gently as she hacked away an overgrown fern with a large, incongruous-looking machete. “She was raised to kill you, remember? They were training her as an assassin even then. I can understand her reticence in mentioning this to Sakura, but I thought that you knew.”

Rei hadn’t, but looking back on it he wasn’t surprised. He had been a dangerous mix, half power-user and half rare-kind. There would have been safeguards in place, even before his mother was murdered and his father lost his mind. Fujiwara Souri had long been wary of rare kinds, and had proved it by arranging Rin’s assassination, tricking Kyo into ordering the deaths of all the rare kinds in retaliation, and with Mishiru and her fledgeling power over flame ‘guarding’ Kyo’s young, apparently talentless son…

“Just another reason never to have children,” Rei muttered bitterly, remembering the delighted gurgle of his dream daughter even so. “They’re all at the mercy of those in power.”

“That isn’t the world we live in anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not having children.”

That made her miss a step. “Oh, but I thought that grandchildren were back on the menu? After that delicious kiss you shared with my daughter in her father’s kitchen…” She trailed off, wagging her eyebrows suggestively. “Zed gave it an 8 out of 10, and that’s saying something.”

Rei sighed, hoping to put her off. “I can’t father children. Physically. I apologize for the disappointment.”

Sakurako looked closely at him, and Rei belatedly realized her power was over life. She couldn’t undo a vasectomy, could she? He paled, but relaxed when she shook her head.

“Yes, I can see that.” Her face twisted into something like genuine sympathy. “I’m sorry, Rei-kun. For you and for Sakura. I know that she would have made a wonderful mother. And I think you would have surprised yourself, in that arena.”

Rei narrowed his eyes at her. What had she seen when she looked at him? Had he always been infertile? Had the vasectomy been unneeded?

(While wondering this, however, he didn’t see or feel Sakurako carefully reach out and spread her fingers behind his lower back, pulling on a tiny tendril of her power before sending it deep into him. Nor did he see the small, satisfied smile she wore when she bounded back to his side.)

“That’s such a disappointment,” she continued, slightly more impishly. “He’d never admit it, but Takehiro is desperate for a grandchild. Or two. Or seventeen.”

“Well, what about you?” He asked tetchily, trying to put the onus on her. “You and Zed haven’t thought about trying for another child? Now that Eden’s…gone?”

She eyed him oddly. “Oh no, Rei-kun. Zed’s power is over death. He doesn’t have viable sperm.”
Rei narrowed his eyes at her. This was the most disturbing conversation he’d had in a long, long time, and Shibuya had brought up the infamous sheep costume just last night.

“But enough about that,” she said blithely. “We’re here.”

Rei looked around dubiously. They had been tromping through the forest for nearly an hour now, and this looked like just another glade to him. “Are you sure?

“Oh, positive. Remember, I lived here for at least six months. Maybe eight. Or was it three years? I can never remember.”

Rei started in surprise. “You...lived here?”

“Oh, of course I did. Oh, that’s right - we didn’t get to that part of the story. It was after the war, of course. After Eden was first founded, back in Japan. It was about the time I was supposed to assassinate Karin, I think? Or maybe just find her? You know, Fujiwara wasn’t very clear. I never really understood the finer points of that mission...”

Rei closed his eyes. “I don’t want to know,” he informed her gravely. “I just want to kill the damned Demon King, go home, and-”

“Bang my daughter! And it’s about time, too!”

I hate everything, Rei muttered internally, as it seemed he got nowhere at all telling her in person. What happened to the Sakurako who was so hyper protective of Sakura she forced her to sit on her lap at all times? What happened to the Sakurako who hated men? Zed, he suspected darkly. Zed and Shibuya happened. I should fix this by killing them both.

Just then, he felt a frisson of energy against his skin. He opened his eyes quickly to find that Sakurako was right. Out of the thick jungle, they had arrived at the gates of the rare kind enclave. It loomed up unexpectedly, partially hidden by the abundant greenery that grew all around it. Although it had been largely destroyed by the century it was uninhabited, there was still an ancient, hallowed beauty to what remained of the old temple. There was also, according to the tingling along his skin, still some of the old protection that had kept this place safe for centuries.

“And here we are,” Sakurako murmured. “Ready, kiddo?”

“I hate you,” Rei said. “And yes.”

Sakurako smirked as she walked through the gate, and a glimmering magic that protected the portal fizzled out at her touch. Rei kept close behind her, senses on high alert. Now that they were inside, he could sense it. His power was connected to hell, and the memory/fireball of Kyo, who still resided in his left arm, buzzed in anticipation.

One of the great kings of hell is here, he told Rei, speaking mind to mind. Perhaps the greatest. You’ll need all the flames in order to defeat him.

“Then it’s a good thing I have them,” Rei muttered aloud. He felt his mouth twisting into a grin. He didn’t quite have Kouji’s battle joy, but damned if he didn’t have something similar. “It’s been a long time since I was able to go all out.”

Thattaboy, Kyo whispered.

“Here,” Sakurako pointed to the left. She picked her way past crumbling columns, and a long-dry
well. “I can feel them. They’re all assembled in the center of the enclave. Used to be fields and such, and the village proper. There’s quite a few of them. We may have been a bit overambitious.”

Rather than instill fear, Rei’s eyes were lit with excitement. “Getting nervous?”

She snorted. “Please. Who do you take me for?”

All of a sudden, they were out of the winding ruins and standing before a great open space. Fields stretched before them, burned and barren. Even now, after all this time, nothing grew. Homes lay abandoned, dilapidated shacks that had not weathered the passing of time well. And in every inch of space before them was a demon, dark and shadowy and punctuated with bone, more intimidating than they had been in the dream-memory. Rei had not given enough credit to those who had faced them. Now that he stood before an innumerable amount of them, he began to understand their caution.

Beyond them was the king. Rei could feel him more than he could see him. There was a great vacuum of power beyond the first 500 hundred or so demons, and it was on him that all their attention was focused. It was he that held them here, when they could be rampaging the island.

It was almost as if they were waiting for something. Some trap to be triggered, or some command that might never come...

“He’s kept them all in one place,” Rei murmured. “That’s fortuitous.”

Sakurako squinted at him. “So, I take the left half, you take the right and we meet in the middle?”

Shibuya had once told him that his greatest weakness was in his simplistic plans of attack. Clearly, he had never shared that lesson with his (ex) wife. Before he could do anything other than nod his assent, however, there was a great cry that broke through the eerie silence.

“The dragon has woken! It is time!”

“We have the best timing,” Sakurako informed him as she unsheathed her katanas. Ogami merely lit up, swathing his hands in blue hellflame.

As one, the demon army turned, finding them standing directly in their way.

“Boo?” Sakurako offered up.

Rei sighed, and that was when the entirety of the demon army attacked them.

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“Come on, oldtimers,” Toki said as he jumped from the helicopter. “Let the whippersnapper show you how it’s done.”

They had landed a few hundred yards from the base of the ravine, Asura’s old home. It was here that Karin had felt her presence most strongly, although when they had been only half a mile off her sense of the dragon’s direction had been severed. As it was far too soon for either of the other teams to have defeated the demons or found the Hikari’s Box in the ruins of the palace, they weren’t sure that the sudden disconnect was a good sign. Still, the best lead they had to go off on
was that Asura would return to her old home, and so they landed the helicopter accordingly.

Toki allowed himself to look out into the gorge, feeling a faint sense of relief when none of this looked familiar to him. Even though the rest of the tale had been told up to Asura’s first ‘slaying’ he hadn’t seen it. And while it was disturbing to see faint signs of a long ago battle - the bones had been scavenged and lost to steady erosion, but not all the shield and metal armor - it was a relief to know that this, at least, was new.

“I’ll show you how it’s done,” Zed muttered as he swung his long legs out from the cockpit. “Just...give me a moment. There’s been a lot of death, here. It’s distracting.”

Although it had only been a few hours since Zed and Sakurako were separated, he wasn’t looking well. He was pale and a little woozy, and would only get worse as time went on. Were it not for their fourth, unexpected travelling companion, Toki bet that Zed would have been more hindrance than help in the coming battle.

As it was, the battle doll that Sakurako had fashioned took one look at Zed, jumped down from the helicopter, and smacked him full across the face.

Toki winced at the force behind that blow, but Zed was a lot perkier almost immediately. Toki supposed it made sense, as the doll was infused with life-energy, and would act as a safeguard in case Zed began succumbing. Still, it was a little disturbing that he looked bright-eyed and bushy-tailed after getting smacked. Especially because (and he’s just being honest, here) he looked more than a little turned on.

“Tell me that’s not normal,” Karin muttered from next to him. “Getting aroused by a doll smacking you? Please tell me that’s just a Zed and Sakurako thing.”

Zed must have heard because he turned and gave them a shrug. “Love is love;” he told them, and Karin and Toki made similar expression of disgust. “Oh, like you’re one to talk,” he continued. “It’s not like you haven’t been pining for a dead guy for the last century.”

Karin stilled, and Toki took a careful step away from her, just in case she went postal. “I will end you,” she promised him quietly.

Zed grinned at her. “I’m already dead, sweetheart.”

Karin’s eyes grew cold. “I didn’t say I’d kill you.”

And that was his cue to step in and save the day. “Ooooorrreeek! Sounds like we need a quick time-out. Zed, go over there and make out with the Sakurako doll, or whatever it is you need to do. Karin, can I have a moment? You know, before the dragon swoops down and tries to eat us?”

Zed, perhaps realizing that this was sound strategy when they needed to fight a damned dragon together, acquiesced. Karin merely gave him a look before walking away.

And Toki was done. Done with her, and done with her weird Fujiwara fixation. He wasn’t his father, nor his uncle. If she couldn’t get that, the upcoming battle was going to be even more of a hot mess than how he’d assumed.

It was time to be dramatic. “So, what did you want on your tombstone? ‘Eaten by dragon, was delicious’?”

“Excuse me?” She asked, frostily.
Toki pushed forward. “Because to me, it seems like that’s the obvious ending, here. The big bad dragon killed your not-boyfriend 100 or so years ago, and now you’ve come to join him. Bonus points if you bring her down first!”

Karin glanced back at him. He’d thought that would be enough for her to let loose, but she kept her temper. “You should focus on the battle before you, Toki.”

“Oh, I’m focused. I’m focused on how you are so prepared to bite it, lady.”

Finally, her temper snapped. “Looking like him will not save you,” she bit out. “Neither will I if you keep this up.”

Toki’s smarmy grin flattened out. “And I’m telling you I don’t need you to save me. That’s what I’ve been telling you all along. I’ve seen Hideyoshi use his power, and I can assure you, I’m 1000 times stronger than he was. He practically wasn’t a power user at all! Besides, I distinctly remember telling you that I wasn’t going to be the Fujiwara that lets you down. What’s it going to take for you to realize that?”

“Oh, guys?” Zed called out to them, but Toki found it easy to ignore him when he finally had Karin’s full concentration.

She stared hard at him, conflicted. “More time than I can give you,” she finally murmured.

“Bullshit,” Toki said in response. “Just look at me and tell me you’re not here to die.”

“Guys?” Zed tried again, and this time the urgency in his voice caught their attention.

“What?” Toki spat. He was finally getting somewhere. Couldn’t Zed let him have a moment, for once?

Karin’s eyes tracked behind him and widened.

Zed turned back to them, one finger pointing towards the rocky outcrop at the base of the gorge that suddenly began to move. “Found the dragon,” he said, as what was now recognizable as Asura reared back its neck and shot forth flame into the sky.

Any hope they’d had that Asura had retained its injuries throughout the years - at least that it might still be blinded - was dashed. The years in Hell had been good for Asura. The dragon was healthy, and much, much larger than it had been 100 years ago.

“Well, fuck,” Toki muttered, and that was when Asura spotted them.

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“I have good news and I have bad news,” Sakurako said, an interminable amount of time later. Rei was unaware of how much time had passed since the demons had attacked, but by his last disjointed count he had slain 187 of them, so he was guessing at least 20 minutes.

He didn’t verbally respond, but in between sending great waves of hellflame towards the demon army, he gave Sakurako a long-suffering glare.

Sakurako have him a huge grin as she mimicked him, sending waves of her life power to mow
through the horde. “The bad news is that my power doesn’t seem to work on the king. I got in a shot at him earlier, and it did jack. The good news is this means that you get to fight the Demon King all by yourself! Don’t worry, I’ll take care of the little guys. No one’s going to interrupt your playtime, Sport.”

“I hate you,” he told her with utter sincerity as he set the eight demons closest to him on fire. “Your ex-husband, too. I do not understand how I can love your daughter this much when the two of you are so detestable.”

“And she looks just like me!” She said in a sing-song as she leapt over several demons, beheading them neatly with her blade. “That’s going to be weird the next time you see her naked!”

Rei vented his frustration with her on the nearest 20 or so demons in his path. Enough was enough. If it meant he could shut Sakurako up, he would just have to slay the damned king already. So, wielding both blade and flame, he cut a swath through them, aiming for the Demon King. He realized that his path was getting easier because Sakurako was drawing them to her with her life power, like moths to a flame. Only 300 hundred or so remained between he and the Demon King, and he grinned before using Mammon’s flame to scorch all the enemies in his path.

He had experimented a little with the other flames, curious to see who he would be facing. Kyo had cautioned him, warning him that Rei would be unlikely able to use the Demon King’s own flame against him. So far, he could definitively say it wasn’t Belphegor, Mammon, or Beelzebub. That meant that it was either Asmodeus or Leviathan. Kyo couldn’t tell for sure, as neither were currently in Hell. What he did suspect was this: whomever the King of All Earth had made the deal with would not be the one Rei faced. That Demon King would be with Hikari’s Box, probably leaving their second-in-command to lead the demon attack.

At this point, Rei barely cared who he faced. His blood was pumping, and his adrenaline was spiking. As long as he faced something powerful it didn’t matter who it was. So when he finally came before the dragon-headed demon king that burned with silver flame, he pulled out his katana, still embedded with the signature nyanmaru head.

Few of his flames worked against Leviathan, after all. He’d have to do this the old-fashioned way.

There were a few stragglers left between Rei and Leviathan, and he dispatched them with grim ease. None were a challenge like his ‘older brother,’ but with Soutarou’s two special powers, that was to be expected. Still, they served as an adequate warm-up before he finally faced down Leviathan. He killed them at close range, with his blade.

Then he turned his full attention to the demon king.

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The plan was simple, and that was probably why Toki distrusted it so much. He was a complex man, thank you very much, and needed strategy like others needed a roof over their heads, or maybe three square meals a day. To simply distract the dragon while Zed opened up a hell portal in which to trap it seemed laughably naive to him. Had he been 6 years younger, he might have
believed that would be it. As it was, he was completely unsurprised when the plan evolved from: *take out the wings and hurt the thing but ultimately rely on Zed*, to: *take out the wings and hurt the thing, watch Zed get steadily more useless as the battle progresses, and keep Karin from committing seppuku with the special life-sword Sakurako made for her before they left.*

Toki could have - and did - predict all of this before he stepped foot on the helicopter. Even the part about Karin attempting to ritually sacrifice herself in order to snap the connection between her and Asura.

And people thought Yuuki was the smart one.

Contrary to popular belief, he had been paying attention to the story. More than that, he had been paying attention to her and Zed, and when the battle doll Sakurako created bit the fucking dust barely ten minutes in (in an attempt to protect Zed from getting flamed) he knew that was bad news. The desperate glance Zed and Karin exchanged only clinched it. There went the Hail Mary play, and once again, neither of them thought he was good enough to be relied on.

Again, he was brilliant and oh so done.

While Zed and Karin had their *oh shit it’s time to die* moment, Toki swooped in and went on the offensive. As Karin struggled to keep it still by manipulating its blood, he launched a beaker of mercury at Asura, smiling grimly when it smashed on the dragon’s snout. It was child’s play to direct the liquid up the nostrils, and with an upward tug, into the beast’s brain. An old trick, but one of his favorites. And when the dragon suddenly snorted and then breathed fire onto its own body, he figured it was still an effective trick, too.

Karin turned to look at him, sweat beading out over her forehead as she kept the dragon physically still. “What did you do?” She called out to him.

“Mercury poisoning,” he smirked at her, happy that she was finally - *finally* - taking him seriously.

“Less talk, more dragon slaying,” Zed called out. He was on his hands and knees from the strain. He was more than halfway dead, and only his iron will and sheer determination kept him from keeling over, or opening the portal to Hell prematurely. “It needs to be wrecked before we send it through!”

Asura coughed out more flame onto itself, and screamed in pain. When its head swung back around to look at them, Toki directed the mercury towards its eyes as well, leaving it blinded as well as quickly losing all its higher reasoning abilities. Soon, with any luck, it would be brain dead.

Until then, however…

The dragon got lucky and breathed flame directly toward them. Toki was able to deflect it with a hastily unfolded thin, titanium plate he’d carried with him. At the last moment, he pulled Karin in with him by yanking on all the metal on her person at once.

He hadn’t realized she’d had an upper cartilage piercing in her right ear until he ripped it out, along with the more noticeable earrings in her lobes. Oh well. He’d apologize for that later. As it was, she slammed into him just in time to avoid getting torched, and for a long moment they huddled behind the makeshift shield, careful not to touch it.

“I feel like Wiglaf,” Toki eventually muttered, thought drifting back to the mythology course he’d taken in college.

That of all things garnered Karin’s attention. “You know the tale of Beowulf?” She asked, with
impeccable Northern European pronunciation. “That is...surprising.”

He glanced at her as the flame petered out to either side of them. “Know how it ends too. And no, before you ask, I’m not going to run your kingdom for you when you die.”

“There is no other way,” she gritted out, peering over the top of the shield. In a smooth motion, she drew the Life Sword Sakurako had made for her, the opposite of the Death Sword that had injured it all those years ago. “I survived all those years and did not age because of the dragon. I sacrificed my wind power in sealing her, and that is most likely what bound her to me in the first place. We are connected, even if it is difficult to explain how or why.”

“And that’s why you’re trying to die.” Toki stated bluntly.

Karin glanced over at the smashed husk of the doll. “I wasn’t supposed to stay dead,” she murmured, before her eyes flicked to the dragon. “But if that is what must happen, that is what I shall do.”

“You are insane,” Toki groaned out as she darted out from behind the shield, sending up the dragon’s own spilled blood in a dampering rain all around it. Although it did not hurt Asura, it confused her. She could not see what was hitting her, after all. The dragon spun in a circle, snapping its jaws at threats. Had it still been able to fly it would have been a different story, but as it was grounded, it was reeling under their combined attacks.

“Toki!” She cried out. “Are you ready?”

“No,” he muttered rebelliously. Then he let the shield drop and prepared anyway.

He’d tried to save her. He really did. But you couldn’t save someone who was running headlong for the end, and now he was done. Done, done, done, and he honestly, truly meant it this time.

“Zed! Get ready!” He yelled, as he brought back one arm in anticipation for gauss cannon. He only had two shots at this at best, but this was still one of the most powerful attacks in his repertoire. Both Shibuya and Karin had agreed that even one was likely to be 10 times as powerful as a single shot from the dragon-killing machine 100 years ago.

The death user raised one thumb weakly. With his other hand, he began opening a portal that swirled with dark energy. It was a gate to hell, and as soon as it was large enough, Toki was going to crush Asura’s skull so hard and so fast that even Miss I-Long-to-Die Shihoin wouldn’t be able to run herself through.

Then, many things happened at once.

Toki focused and shot the spiral of power down his left arm, feeling the bones break underneath his skin. Off in the distance, Zed’s portal grew larger, darker, sucking in shadows as if the portal wanted to drag him in, as well. Asura screamed, and her fire illuminated the darkening sky. Heat washed over them all when the fireball shot only three feet over their heads.

And just as the gauss cannon hit her, Karin ran herself through with the Blade of Life.

In retrospect, Toki should have been watching Asura. It wasn’t every day that he got to see a dragon, let alone fight one. But in that moment, he found himself unable to look away from Karin. She fell to her knees, blade lodged clean through her torso, eyes fixed on the dragon. Zed was no doubt doing his thing, if the wailing of damned souls and growing darkness was any indicator. The portal had to be gigantic now, if Asura was going to be forced into it.
Yet still Toki watched her. Blood bubbled up from her lips, and her teeth clenched. One hand dropped down to the ground, and her fingers digging into the dirt.

_She could die right where Hideyoshi did_. Toki thought disjointedly. _Together at last._

It was this uncharacteristic moment of sentimentality that finally jarred him back to his senses. There was still something he could do. He had two arms, after all. He ripped his gaze from Karin to Asura, who, even with only half of her skull remaining, was resisting Zed’s efforts to suck her through the Hell portal. He had to dash to the side to get the angle right, but when he did, he unleashed one final Gauss Cannon.

The attack hit Asura dead on, tipping the dying beast back into the Hell dimension. As soon as bulk of her was through the portal failed, and Zed fell to the ground. Thankfully Asura was disappeared along with the portal, leaving the three of them alone on in the gorge. Zed lay on his back, gasping for breath, struggling to keep the shadows of death that crawled over his skin from sucking him down into a true death. Barely 20 feet away, Karin had fallen to her side, a pool of blood puddled beneath her.

And Toki, with two broken arms, was unsure if he could save either of them.

_Well, shit_, he thought. _That didn’t go well._

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It was not a quick, nor an easy battle. Rei lost count of how many times he should have died, and how many times he had to ignite his palms with flames just to burn away all the sweat. His blade was protected by his own power and Leviathan’s flames only due to the rare-kind blood infused nyanmaru icon at its hilt. Otherwise, it would have been destroyed as quickly as his optimism.

He found himself reflecting on odd things, as his body strained to the utmost to meet Leviathan’s challenge. It was almost meditative. The cross on his back felt heavy. Surprisingly so, as it was no innocent he faced. Perhaps it was a side-effect of fighting a King of Hell?

Rei didn’t know, but he bucked up and pushed on.

_You were meant for other things, my son_, his mother’s voice - Rin’s voice, so recognizable now, after all the dream memories - whispered at one point. _You came from love, how could you choose death?_

_So that I can protect those I love_, Rei would have answered her, if he could. Even thinking the words seemed to lighten the cross at his back, however, and it freed him to unleash a sweeping parry that had Leviathan screaming in rage. He pressed the advantage and with incredible effort, brought the blade down on one of Leviathan’s wings.

The silver flame dissipated beneath the steel blade. Rei dove back to avoid a cascade of flame, but when he rolled back to his feet he was surprised to see that the wing had not reformed.
Surprised, but gratified. It was time to go for the other one.

Now that Leviathan was hindered, it strove doubly to protect the other wing. Rei was beaten back three times before he hung back a moment, regrouping. Weakness was settling over him like a blanket, darkening his vision like the skies at dusk. *I need strength*, he told himself, searching for it. If only the cross was not so heavy! *I need endurance. I need-

*You need to get your head out of your ass,* his brother’s voice cut in, echoing through his psyche. It was a jarring mix of the proper tone of his lost form, and the wild elation of his true form. *That cross on your back isn’t to weaken you. It was to make you stronger!*

*By testing me, yes,* Rei argued with the imaginary voice of his brother, living in his head. He would never tell anyone about this. Toki would never let him live it down. *Like weighted training clothes. But now-

*You dumbass,* his brother snarled, albeit fondly. *Still missing the point. The cross isn’t a punishment. It’s a weapon.*

Rei’s eyes widened. Nonsensical as it was, something about it made an abstract, yet powerful sense to him…

*Also, heads up. Demon King, remember?*

Rei glanced at Leviathan out of the corner of his eye. It was practically upon him, silver flame swirling all throughout its body. Its giant maw opened wide, ready to spew forth flame.

Rei moved quickly. He launched himself to the side, swerving around the Demon King’s grasping talons. Using the perceived weight of the cross as a counterbalance, he spun wildly and unpredictably past Leviathan’s grip, and then at the last moment, extended his blade.

The Demon King reared back in pain. Now shorn of both its wings, its shape was flickering madly. In its flailing it got a lucky hit in, and there was a searing pain down the left side of Rei’s body. He was so tired it took several moment to set the flame out. His clothes sagged down his body, and he wasted precious moments tearing them away, leaving him in nothing but his underclothes before Leviathan.

From far off, there was the sound of a wolf-whistle, and Rei remembered just how much he hated Sakurakouji Sakurako.

He centered himself, tearing himself away from any outside considerations. *This is it,* he told himself. *Take him down.*

He lunged forward, but Leviathan was not done yet. He blocked Rei’s attack, not with flame, but with his claws. Rei parried desperately, but without his clothes he was totally open to Leviathan’s attack. The claws caught on his shoulder, and blood sprayed up in a high arc. Rei tumbled to the side, rolling out of range of a counterattack.

Leviathan recognized its chance. It lunged after him, forcing Rei to parry with his injured arm. The weight of the blade now seemed heavier than the cross on his back, and he grit his teeth. If only he had a moment, he could throw his blade into his other hand, and fight less impeded.

The Demon King did not let up, however, and as the pain mounted and his arm weakened, Rei began to make calculations. If he lit up, would he be able to distract Leviathan? He could feel his lost form hovering, ready to swoop in when his determination faltered. He needed to get close enough to land a final blow, and/or weaken him enough for Sakurako to take him down with her
blade. But was it too late?

The world swung hazily around him, even as Leviathan pressed its advantage. There wasn’t enough strength, or time. Leviathan must have been sapping out his energy as he was fighting him, or perhaps his injuries were worse than he’d thought. With his injuries and the cross on his back *(it’s not a punishment, it’s a source of strength! He could almost hear his brother say)* he was too weak to light up, push past the demon’s assault, and land the final blow-

*You are never too weak,* Kyo’s voice replied, serious and kingly, rather than the relaxed colloquialisms of Code:Emperor. *Not you. Not her son. Not our son.*

A flare of...something rose in his chest. Hope? Optimism? Love? Rei was too hard-pressed to identify it, but it gave him the surge he needed. With a resounding cry, he lit his entire body on fire, and with a quick lunge and slash, pushed past the dragon’s claws. They rent his skin as he shoved through, but he was so far beyond pain that he was grateful for the blood running down his skin, as it made sliding into the demon’s hold easier.

*I am proud of you, my son,* Kyo whispered, and then it was as if there was no cross on his back at all. Rei felt lighter than he’d ever known. His father’s acceptance had given him wings, and even though his power was failing, it was simple and easy to throw himself up into the air, and lift up the blade, and bring it down through the demon’s chest.

There was an explosion of light, and Rei was thrown back. He hit the ground hard, and the breath in his lungs shuddered out of him. Pain washed over him, lancing and immediate. Still, he struggled up on an elbow to see if Leviathan would counterattack-

But Leviathan was a shadow of his former power now, disappearing limb by limb as his body flared out. Rei watched until the great Demon King wailed once more, before going up in one final puff of smoke. It rose, darkening the sky above, before dissipating in the wind. Rei fell back down to the ground, his head tilted to the side. When he realized he could see the grass through his arm, he knew he’d entered his lost form.

Even the blood that pumped steadily from his wounds was translucent. How would Sakurako find him now? *Am I going to die here?* He wondered, disjointedly. It wasn’t so concerning a thought. He’d faced enough, and with his family’s love for him resounding in his psyche, he could think of worse ways to go.

Then, as ever, his thoughts turned to Sakura. *God, I love her,* he thought, and it was like a light had gone off in his heart. *I don’t care about my cross anymore. My victims may have me when I’m dead. Until my end comes, let everything in me be of her.*

He began to float off into the dark, but then there was a loud voice, surprisingly nearby.

“Oh shit. Shit shit shit. Where the fuck did you go? Oh, do not go all lost form on me. Sakura is going to kill me if I lose you! C’mon, Rei! Appear! Think of the grandchildren!”

*I hate her,* he thought fuzzily.

“Rei, if you don’t give me a signal right now, I am setting Sakura up with Yuuki.”

That startled a response out of him. “*Fuck...off,*” he groaned, but then the spinning dark took him, and there was nothing more.
So this fic. It’s getting there. I’m telling myself this as much as any reader because damn I need a kick in the pants. But! Seriously, getting there. Not too much left, and I even started Shibuya’s code:shot the other day, so ostensibly that will be finished before we all died of old age. (Yes, it’s already my favorite one. Everyone is angry, and I love it.)

... 
Next chapter: the last of the Triumvirate is faced, and Hikari’s Box is closed at last.
The palace of Takama ga hara had been beautiful once; Rui knew from the dream memories. Now it was a burnt out husk, a mere echo of its former grandeur. Even from the aerial view there was something eerily absent about it. From her companions’ silence, she assumed they agreed. All that could be heard was the *whump whump whump* of the helicopter blades as they circled around the ruins, looking for the best place to land.

Finally, Kouji pointed to the eastern sector. “Somewhere near there, Takehiro. That was where her chambers were. If the box remains, it is undoubtedly there.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Shibuya said, before steering the helicopter around. A moment later, he glanced back at Rui. “Coming in for a landing, Prince. Any last questions before we do?”

“Yeah!” She called back, loudly to be heard over the wind. “What’s our battle plan?”

“We don’t have one!” Shibuya called back, sounding delighted. “We’d just ignore it anyway!”

“I thought we were supposed to talk about the puppeteer?” Rui yelled back, leaning forward to pinch Shibuya hard. He yelped, and she took a distinct satisfaction from that. “Or am I just supposed to assume it is Hikari?”

“The demon inside of her,” Kouji said. “It is not her, anymore. Anything that remains - *if* we are correct - will likely be one of the great demon kings of hell. Whichever one Matsuhiro summoned in order to resurrect his dead wife, Shouko.”

“So we think that Hikari died then?” She asked.

“Oh, who knows,” Shibuya said. “I’m fairly sure Shihoins can’t actually die. You all just go to ground for a bit and then resurrect at the unlikeliest time. Almost like . . . a manga.”

His flippancy made Rui snort, but prompted a dark look from Kouji. She glanced out the window, watching the wreckage below her growing steadily closer, but whipped her head back around when Kouji got up from his seat and flung himself down into the seat next to hers.

“Um, we are still in motion,” Shibuya called out. “Hands and arms in the vehicle at all times, and all that.”

Kouji ignored him in favor of looking at Rui. His expression was so earnest she could hardly
breathe, let alone find the will to chide him for doing something dangerous. She stared back helplessly as a quiet voice within her assured her that this was it, here was the moment she had been waiting for.

“Rui,” he said quietly. “Whatever happens down there, I want you to understand that our bond is like nothing I’ve ever experienced.”

Rui’s felt as if her swallow was audible over the deafening sound of the helicopter blades. Shibuya’s snort absolutely was, as was his commentary, “Oh please. Love talk before battles? Who are you, Ogami Rei?”

Without taking his eyes off her Kouji kicked the back of Shibuya’s chair, making the pilot hiss. The curve of her lips quirked in a small grin, but it faded when Kouji turned back to her, his slanted dark eyes taking her in with complete seriousness.

“Why are you telling me this?” She asked, daring to hope.

He licked his lips, the first sign of nervousness. “Because you’re important to me,” he said frankly. “Truth be told, you’re the most—”

Before he could finish that tantalizing thought, the helicopter rocked violently, spilling Kouji from his seat to the floor. Shibuya began yelling immediately, something about mayday, lost control, and we’re going down, lady and gent! As the helicopter plummeted down to the ground, Kouji barked out a laugh and pulled on his power . . . but when his brows knitted in confusion Rui knew it hadn’t worked. There was no time to puzzle over why his power was blocked. She reacted instinctively and attempted to cushion the helicopter with her power to keep it from exploding on impact.

When her power too was blocked, she looked up with the light of panic in her eyes.

“Time to jump!” Shibuya crowed, throwing himself out of the cockpit and throwing open the side door. “Kouji, buffer us when we fall!”

Kouji half-reached for, half-shoved her out of the helicopter, and she went with him. But the ground was approaching too quickly, a wasteland of ruins all illuminated by a piercingly bright white light. It filled her with a deep sense of foreboding, and her last coherent thought was wanting to warn her companions.

“Something’s wrong!” She yelled, and it was all she could get out before the light flared ever brighter. The ground rose up to meet them, but she was unconscious by the time they hit the ground.

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She awoke - which was a surprise in itself - suddenly, her eyes flying wide and her body on full alert. What she saw when she came to herself had her doubting her sanity, however. Her eyes opened unto a bright, sepia-toned garden, as if she had stepped into an old photograph. She blinked hard to make sense of it but eventually accepted that the garden itself was indistinct. The edges of the towering flora were hazy, as were the shadowy marble benches, as was the trellised gazebo hung heavy with ill-defined roses . . . as was the faceless figure, bedecked in an lovely, old-fashioned kimono, standing in the center of the garden, holding a dark, teakwood box.

Target acquired, Rui thought. But where were Kouji and Shibuya? They had to be close by, she could remember Kouji’s grip on her as they spiralled down past the out-of-control helicopter.
Careful to keep quiet, she rolled onto her side, taking advantage of the cover of a weeping willow tree. It also gave her a better vantage of the east quadrant of the garden, where she finally laid eyes on her comrades.

She sucked in a quick, surprised breath. Kouji stood in an unnatural position, head tilted, arms outstretched at his sides, one foot raised in the air like he was a marionette. Lying just under his upraised foot was Takehiro, who seemed to be still unconscious. Kouji’s foot was only a few inches away from his shoulder and it jerked spasmodically, like Kouji was trying not to bring it down. Rui’s attention flew to his face, where now she could see him grimacing and twitching, clearly trying to fight against some invisible influence.

Whatever was happening over there, it wasn’t good. Rui sent a spike of darkness towards the underside of Kouji’s foot, and it was strong and unexpected enough that it toppled him right over. Then she was up and running, tearing through strange, yet beautiful flowers in an effort to reach them before Kouji’s counterattack, and to determine just what the heck was going on.

The figure at the center of the garden turned, slow and eerie, like a character in a horror film. A spasm of fear shook Rui’s heart, but her resolve remained strong. She leapt over a bench, and shot a hail of shadow pellets - each as deadly as a bullet from a gun - towards the faceless female creature, but none of them did any damage. All were absorbed into the creature’s skin, causing its skin to bend and warp from the force of the blows.

“Oh, shit shit shit,” she breathed as she slid to her knees by Shibuya’s unconscious form. Kouji’s body hurled forward, and she threw up a wall of darkness to stop him. He rebounded off of it, gurgling out her name as he fell back. That more than anything proved he was somehow not in control of himself - he could have broken through her wall easily with his own power had he truly wanted to, without such erratically jerky movements.

Rui’s head whipped around to the monster at the center of the garden, who stood with her blank, featureless face turned in their direction. *Bitch was gonna pay,* she decided, and then decided to even the playing field.

“WAKE UP, YOU SHITTY CAT!” She screamed directly into Shibuya’s ear at the top of her lungs.

Shibuya jolted and tried to roll away from her. “Fuck, that’s loud!” He cried out, bringing a hand up to cup his ear protectively.

“We’ve got problems!” She shouted, taking no pity on him at all. “That thing has control of Kouji!”

Shibuya glanced from the creature to Kouji, who had just thrown himself against the darkness wall once again. He stumbled back, but not as far, this time. His left arm raised in an odd gesture, like he was about to throw a spear.

“Damnit,” Shibuya mumbled, and then Rui found herself horizontal, hoisted into his arms as he leapt out from beyond the safety of their darkness barricade.

Rui pounded a fist to his bicep. “What are you-” Before she could finish, Kouji hurled his arm forward, like he was throwing a baseball. Although she could not see what he had done to the air, seconds later the barricade was blown apart into millions of shards, sucking in the light of the garden before she called back her power into herself.

Kouji immediately began to chase him, his movements becoming far more natural. Either the puppeteer’s power was becoming more subtly applied, or he was losing against her control over his
“So, here’s what we’ve got,” Shibuya huffed as he sprinted through the garden, leaping from point to point with Rui in his arms while Kouji raced after them. “We’ve gotta take down Demon Monster Lady and keep Kouji distracted as we do so. We should probably split up, but I’m worried Kouji will kill me afterwards if we do so. Your thoughts?”

Rui held on with grim determination. While she would given anything to not be in the shitty cat’s arms right now, he was the only thing that could not only move faster than just Yuuki, but Kouji, as well.

“My power doesn’t work on her,” she admitted. “She sucked it in like it was nothing.”

“Well, shit,” Shibuya said succinctly. “That means you gotta keep Kouji at bay. You know, if you took your clothes off, he’d probably have a heart attack. Could work.”

“After this is over, I am finding a way to kill you!” Rui shrieked, blood rising to her face unnaturally quickly.

“Hey, one thing at a time, ok?”

Rui glanced up to retort and then stopped cold. It was no longer Shibuya Takehiro holding her, but Fujiwara Souri. Panic made her fight his grip, shrieking blue hell.

“What the - Rui, stop!”

She could not stop. It was like all common sense had been leached from her skull. Although she knew the Prime Minister was dead, and had been for years now, he was somehow holding onto her. There was a filter between her brain and her heart, and it’s name was terror. It gave her the strength to escape the evildoer’s grip and stumble to freedom.

“Rui, no! Watch out for Kouji!”

Rui was suddenly, incandescently furious. Not only had the Prime Minister returned from the dead - or perhaps he had never been dead at all - but he was telling her to watch out for the man that she loved? Shrieking in fury, she directed her power after him . . . only for it to slide off his skin like water off a duck’s back.

“What the hell?” She said aloud, stunned. He’d never been this well protected before, it was why he’d enlisted so many power-user bodyguards in the past. A terrible thought occurred to her.

“What, did you insert a rare kind’s arm into yourself, too?”

The Prime Minister actually stopped to look at her. “What are you - oh. Oh, I see,” he murmured. “You think I’m him. That’s how she’s doing it- shit!”

His realization was cut off by Kouji streaking for him, a dark, grinning blur, intent on bloodlust. It made something inside her resonate with the desire to do the same. They took off together, working in tandem as they chased the evil man around the garden. Somehow he remained a step ahead of them, bounding from safe point to safe point, sassing up a storm. He even found the gall to talk of their companions as they chased him, trying to box him into a corner so that they could use their power against him.

*But it didn’t work the first time,* a quiet voice that sounded a lot like her Empress Paradox form whispered. *Why should it now?*
“It will work!” Rui said aloud. “I’ll kill him myself, this time!”

“Uh, Prince? Who are you talking to?” The Prime Minister asked, although Kouji took no notice of her.

“No one!” She shrieked, and the voice within chuckled.

*Think hard, little prince. Why wouldn’t your power work on someone?*

“Because he’s done something to a rare kind?” Rui said, faltering. A headache was settling in with startling speed, and she stumbled at the pain in her head. Kouji took no notice, and her chest throbbed. He’d always taken notice of her weakness before, why was he chasing after the Prime Minister with no thought to her now?

*No, no. You’re better than that. Do not avert your eyes from the truth!*

The pain in her head was blinding now; this was no natural headache. While its purpose must be to dissuade her from thinking about this further, it served as the impetus to slot the truth of the situation into place. Her power wasn’t working against the Prime Minister because it wasn’t the Prime Minister at all. It was the rare kind, the shitty cat, *Shibuya*, and somehow, she had been made to forget that.

She stumbled to a stop, leaving Kouji racing after the man that still appeared to be Fujiwara Souri, but she knew was Shibuya Takehiro. Her head felt as if it were about to explode, and darkness began collecting around her body. Her Empress Paradox form was coming to the fore in an unconscious attempt to protect her from this magical incursion. Darkness enclosed her head like a helmet, and for a moment it cut through her enemy’s power, leaving her with a moment to think.

*Shibuya could not run forever, nor could he attack their true enemy with Kouji intent on dismantling him. He would likely attack whoever got too close to the puppeteer, and that meant that it would be up to Rui, because even in the depths of madness, she knew that Kouji would never hurt her. At least, not too badly. She hoped.*

*Here goes,* she thought, and then called out to Shibuya, “Keep him distracted, you shitty cat!”

“*What?*” He squeaked, and now she could even hear his voice, whereas before it had been the Prime Minister’s smarmy one. There was no time for hesitation, however. Rui barrelled towards the faceless woman at the center of the garden, gritting her teeth against the pain in her head that now radiated all throughout her body. Although it was like knives rending flesh from bone, it was not enough to stop or slow her. Like an arrow she shot for the woman, and as she closed in on the last few feet separating them, the eerie woman turned.

The face suddenly had familiar features, and with a blinding flash of light, the world around them changed.

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Rui collapsed to the ground, shaking and shivering. One moment she had been hurtling towards the woman, and the next there had been nothing. Yet in no time at all she had landed, and it was a disconnect that felt like she had fallen through a window into a different world, or slipped through a dimension simply by opening a door.

As she looked around herself, she realized her analogy may be more apt than she knew. This was a different world, a different garden. The flora was no longer wild and untamed, it was carefully kept, pristine, albeit still foreign. The beauty was staggering and in full flower - this was no land
on the verge of death. Even the lighting was different here. Although there was no sun in the sky it was broad daylight, allowing the perfect circle of connected marble benches to leave a circular shadow just a few inches to the left of them. Standing in the paved circle, delicately shod feet on faded brick, stood the eerie figure from earlier.

She, too, was changed. Her kimono was old and worn, as opposed to new and beautifully colored as it had been earlier. Her hair was up in a simple knot, whereas before it had hung lank and listless around her face. And her face was as it should be, for here was Hikari Shihoin, once known as the Queen of Heaven, the last queen of Takama-ga-hara.

There was no box in her hands, however. While the other changes were notable, this was the one that worried Rui outright. For if the box only existed in one garden - or in the finished product of the photograph, not the negative - how would she manage to destroy it while she was trapped here?

With characteristic bluntness, Rui decided it was time to find out. She stalked over to Hikari, clad in her Empress Paradox form, shoving aside the feelings of insecurity she'd learned after watching the older generations' history.

She had learned more than just that from watching their story, and so she adopted a tack she thought might work with someone as empathetic as Hikari. “Queen Hikari! I need your help. If there is any goodness left in you, please give it.”

Hikari looked up at her, as young and as beautiful as she'd been in the dream-memory, but sorrowful, as well. “It is I who needs your help,” she whispered, voice rusty from disuse. “Why else should I have called you here?”

“You brought me here?” Rui asked, keeping her distance and her guard up. “Rather than Kouji?”

Hikari shook her head. “I could not bring him. The demon king, Asmodeus, had his hooks on him as soon as you all crashed to the earth. He remembered him from when he'd touched him before, back when the palace was destroyed and the dragon Asura was locked away. Through my love for him, I had managed to free him then, but this time I could not.” Her head hung down. “I am so weak now. I am but a shadow of my former self.”

“But it’s your box,” Rui said. “You’re connected to it, aren’t you? Weren’t you the one who opened it?”

“You know even that?” Hikari murmured. “He must trust you a great deal to divulge family secrets.”

“We are family, he and I. He raised me.”

“Like Karin,” Hikari said while wearing a sad smile. Rui thought she would reminisce further, but she shook her head. “There is not much time,” she continued. “Already it seeks to expel you. Kouji has fought your friend into a corner, and he will not be able to stand against him much longer. We need to undo the power of the box.”

“What do you need me to do?” Rui asked, readying her scythe. “I can break it if you can make it manifest.”

Hikari shook her head. “No physical power can unmake it. It is only the will of the maker, or, in this case, as my father has died, who it has enslaved.”

Rui faltered. “Then you have to break the box. If you already knew that, why haven’t you already?”
“I don’t have the strength,” she stressed. “It has leached away my power for over a century, and anything I do it simply converts into energy.”

“Then how can I help you?” Rui asked, frustrated.

“Asmodeus does not know your power,” Hikari explained. “With your power and my intention, I believe we can break through the box, and then there will be nothing holding even a fragment of Asmodeus’s power to the earthly sphere.”

Rui thought fleetingly of Rei, who commanded his flame. Even Mishiru had a connection to the demon lord, but she thought that was different. They had fought for and won his approbation, whereas in this case, a part of the demon lord had been trapped in a box by Karin and Hikari’s father for at least twenty years before Hikari had accidentally set him free. Truth be told, Rui suspected the entire demon uprising had begun as a way for the demons to free their king, all because Matsuhiro, the King of All Earth, had locked him away in a deal gone wrong to raise his first wife from the dead.

All this had come from one man’s desperation, and his unwillingness to allow that his love was gone forever. But Hikari had enabled it to continue, in much the same vein. In her sorrow she had opened the box, and to the end she had been unable to let go of her love for Kouji.

Was that what was happening even now? Rui could not tell if she were telling the truth or lying, and if she were, it could mean Rui’s doom. There was no guarantee that Rui’s power would break through Asmodeus’s, nor if that was even Hikari’s true aim. She could also be planning on trapping Rui in the box. It might be enough to escape herself, and pursue Kouji with more fervor than Rui had ever allowed herself to.

The thought was like an icepick to her stomach. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

Hikari watched her closely. “All I have is my word. Do you need more?”

“I can’t read your heart,” Rui said, narrowing her eyes at her. “But I know how much you love Kouji, and I think that you’d do anything to be with him, even now.” She swallowed thickly before admitting, “I know I would.”

The light of comprehension dawned on Hikari’s face. “You love him, as a woman does a man? I see,” she said sadly. “Then we are akin.”

Rui grimaced. All throughout the story she had compared herself to Hikari, and not always favorably. She was not as beautiful, not as honest with her feelings, not already bonded to him as family. She’d had to fight for every moment of recognition she’d earned, and had established their teacher/student bond as a child only by attempting to throw off her gender identity. Hikari had resorted to none of that, and her unwillingness to concede who she was even though the man she loved did not approve was a source of jealousy for Rui.

Had she been that strong all along, would Kouji have fallen in love with her?

Perhaps Hikari’s power was not quite run, as she stepped close to her and, unnervingly quickly, cupped her palm over Rui’s cheek.

“I see,” she said again, her eyes soft with kindness. “Contrary to what you believe, I think we are not so different at all. But if you need a truth to convince yourself of my honesty, then here is one neither of us can deny: Kouji may never love a woman in his lifetime. I worry that I have hurt him too badly for this, left him traumatized with fear of love to act on it, even were he to feel it for
someone. If that is the case, would you be able to let go of him, as I could not?”

Rui looked down the scant inches between them, and knew the answer as if it had been ingrained in her soul. She was a protector, so much so that she had been termed the protective goddess.

“Ask me a hard question, lady,” she said with a bit of her normal vernacular. “I’d never let anyone hurt him. Not our enemies, not himself . . . certainly not me.”

Hikari’s smile grew, and for a moment Rui understood how so many had loved her, before the kingdom fell. There was true kindness and empathy in her gaze, and it felt like the queen herself was happy simply to connect with Rui.

“That is all I want as well,” she admitted. “So let us go about this another way. It does not matter whose will it is that breaks the box. As long as we work together, we shall not fail. Let us protect him, cousin.”

“Cous-?” Rui tried to ask, but before she could finish the word Hikari lifted herself up onto her toes, and pressed her lips against Rui’s. Blood rushed to her face, but her initial violent reaction was delayed by her astonishment. In the next moment she felt power and intent coursing through her, and her scythe flared.

End this now, Rui Hachiouji, Hikari murmured, in tandem with her Empress Paradox voice. Send me to my rest.

Hikari was the box, Rui belatedly realized. That was why there was no box in this world. So she raised her scythe and swung, slicing through the midsection of the ancient queen, their purpose and power united.

As the dark blade tore through flesh, a great cry resounded throughout the dreamscape. A terrible light tore through the world once again, blinding her and overstimulating all her senses. For the last time, Rui fell to the ground, unconscious.

Her last thoughts were of the dying queen, and Kouji.

Chapter End Notes

YOUR YEARLY UPDATE. IT IS HERE.
We are really, truly, almost done. I keep thinking ‘oh, I’ll just put this on hiatus,’ but then here is a chapter and I’m one quarter done with the Shibuya/Sakurako one shot (which is gonna be long, like Rin/Kyo’s.) Besides that there are only a few chapters left, with one or two surprises . . . and one last character to exit the field. (Also more Rei and Sakura kisses because COME ON.)

Next chapter teaser:
If it’s chapter 36 - the survivors converge to realize their wounds may not all be healed, and Rei and Sakura make ALL THE KISSES.

If it’s Shibuya/Sakurako oneshot - the infamous tale of love and loss which includes a long-suffering best friend, a red-haired ghost and an angry 10-year-old . . . and Fujiwara Souri’s budding obsession with rare kinds.
Chapter Summary

In which goodbyes are made and the last players enter in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

2018

Toki leaned his head back against the wall and sighed. All around him was motion and energy; doctors and nurses rushing around him, quiet yet charged announcements over the intercom, the ebb of human voices, punctuated by a sob, a gasp, an angry demand to be told of a loved one’s fate. Hospitals were the worst, he had long known, but this was just ridiculous. He allowed that maybe he wasn’t in the best mood, but the low thrum of anxiety that had permeated him since the dragon Asura bit the dust wasn’t helping things.

(Also, both his arms were broken, and as he had turned down the fantastic drugs for mental clarity, he hurt like hell.)

It took twelve hours for everyone to converge in Eden’s Hospital. Were it not for the odious Heike and his unapologetic connection to what remained of Eden’s communication and transport divisions, it might not have happened at all. Toki in particular had been screwed. Two broken arms, and Karin and Zed bleeding out—both literally and metaphorically—at this feet. He had called Heike as quickly as he could, begging for assistance, and it was in describing the situation that he had the idea that might have saved them. He had, after nearly passing out in pain, convinced the metal of the life blade to bend a bit, leaving the blade still lodged in Karin. This kept her from bleeding out entirely, but also allowing it to imbue her with life, keeping her away from the direst edge. For Zed, he had kicked him over to the remains of the life sword, which, having bent, could now lay on him while still lodged in Karin. This slowed his descent into death, although surely couldn’t have been good for Karin.

I had to do it, he thought, guiltily. There was no other way to save even one of them.

Heike had come through with his characteristic efficiency, and a helicopter with an emergency ambulance team was there within twenty minutes. Twenty minutes of watching Zed and Karin struggle for life, but it was worth it now. Neither had died, although neither had awoken from their comas.

Still, while there was life, there was hope, Toki mused, wishing he had a cigarette. Zed would probably be all right, especially now that Sakurako was here. She had shoved her way into his quarantined room, back when she and Rei had arrived, about eight hours ago. She threw herself down onto the cot and took him into her arms, and began working on negating his power with her own, and that was that. They were both resting, and likely would until he had completely stabilized, but it was one less worry on his mind.
Toki, of course, was largely fine. Broken arms sucked, yes, but they were already in contact with Aoba down in Africa, and when she and her harem of boyfriends showed up, all would be right as rain.)

Yuuki was fine, as well, although still not up to 100%. The demons had done a number on him, but it was nothing a little rest couldn’t cure. The same could be said for Rei, who was still in his lost form—they’d swathed him head to foot in clothes so that he couldn’t pull an Invisible Man and run off—but was otherwise generally fine. Kouji and the Shitty Cat were also hunky-dory, although Toki hadn’t seen much of them since they’d arrive a few hours ago. They were much more distracted with Karin and Rui . . . the latter of which was also in an inexplicable coma since she had somehow destroyed Hikari’s box.

So that was what it really boiled down to, in terms of casualties. Karin was almost certainly dying, Zed was maybe not dying for once, and Rui was in a coma which made Kouji, at the very least, think she was going to die. Everyone else was manageable, except for maybe Maka who had been admitted as well, although she had immediately vacated her room in favor of sitting with Karin as soon as the half-blood’s surgery was over.

Shibuya had joined Maka after checking in on Sakura, who was making the rounds on all her injured friends. Karin’s old family was at her side, waiting for her to either pass on or wake up. Not that the doctors gave her chances much hope. The blood transfusions were not taking the way they should, to the marvel of the doctors, even if the stab wound had been expertly placed and her internal organs were largely unscathed.

Shibuya had admitted it was probably for the best that Karin never wake, although the inevitability of it didn’t draw him from the room. He sat there at a chair by her bedside, his hand around hers, his mouth tight, his expression hopeless. The last time Toki had looked, Maka had been on the bed with Karin, crying quietly.

Toki banged his head against the wall a little harder, suddenly and incandescently furious. He fucking knew that she was going to die. He’d known it since her eye started bleeding and she’d matched his heterochromia. And he’d done everything he could to keep her alive, partially because he kind of liked how she antagonized Shibuya, but also because his father had once . . . well. Cared for her, in his own, twisted way. And as Toki still cared for his father, in a only slightly less twisted way, he didn’t want her to die like this.

This isn’t romantic, he thought. This is just stupid.

“Toki-kun?”

Toki cracked an eye open to see Sakura standing before him, wearing her characteristic look of determination.

“Yes?” He asked.

“May I sit with you for a moment?”

“Me too, me too,” a languid voice came from the opposite end of the hall. Both turned to see Yuuki hobbling towards them, using a crutch to keep steady.

“Only if you sit on Toki’s other side,” Sakura said primly. “I hadn’t planned on having the boundaries conversation with you until you’d healed, but I’m not afraid to begin now, if you make me.”
Yuuki gave her a tired grin as he gingerly sat on Toki’s other side. He winced, and Toki felt a muted empathy for his friend’s injuries.

“No problem there, Nyanmaru,” Yuuki said, giving her a tired wink. “I only did that to prove a point. Even if you are kind of hot.”

“That’s like saying Sakurako-san is kind of hot,” Toki pointed out.

“Why do you think I specified ‘kind of?’”

“Boys,” Sakura called them both to attention, sitting on the bench next to Toki. “Glad as I am that you two are well enough to discuss how sexually attractive you find my mother, I did come here with a purpose. Several, in fact.”

“I’m all ears, Nyanmaru,” Yuuki said, wearing a deadpan expression.

Toki narrowed his eyes at him. Was this the time for bad jokes? Was it ever the time for bad jokes?

“Rui’s condition hasn’t changed. The doctor’s are still hopeful, but they have no idea why she’s not waking up. Kouji won’t let anyone else in the room for now, but at the next shift change he’ll spend an hour at Karin’s side.”

Oh, so Kouji would manage to pull himself away from Rui’s side? Color him surprised. “He’s not more concerned about his dying cousin?” Toki asked, his tone more annoyed than he’d meant to project.

Sakura’s brows furrowed. “I don’t think he understands that she’s dying. I told him how serious it was, and that Father and Maka-san were with her, waiting for the end . . . but he just shut his eyes and said she was an idiot for making them wait.”

Toki frowned. “Them, or him?”

Sakura shrugged. “I can’t be sure, actually. I assumed he meant them.” She shook her head. “I think he’s in shock. Or maybe he just believes that she can’t truly die.”

Well, that would leave him in a party of one. Everyone else was ready for her to croak, and if Shibuya and Maka, the two who loved her most were sure she was done, how could she come back from that?

Yuuki sat up a little straighter, tilted his head, and growled, “They’re here.”

Sakura glanced over at him. “Who’s here?”

But Toki knew that tone of voice. “Ugh. Both of them?”

Yuuki took a second before nodding. “Yep. And Sixth is with them too. They’re talking about—” He froze before his eyes cut over to Sakura. “Uh. Football.”

Toki inwardly groaned. Yuuki sucked at subterfuge, he really, really did.

Sakura narrowed her eyes at him. “What kind of football?”

“Um, American?”

“Yuuki, stop telling bad lies and just get to the point,” Toki interrupted him. “Do we have time to run?”
“Uh, no.”

“Hello, Toki. It appears you have not found any manners, in the last few years.”

Toki winced as he looked up at a smirking Heike Masaomi, who was giving him that terrible, *I know everything and have tied it up at least twice* look that he almost always wore.

*How was this man friends with my sister?* Toki inwardly asked, not for the first time.

“I’m in pain,” he said. “No politeness without painkillers.”

Sakura stood and gracefully bowed to Heike. Charmed, he returned the gesture.

“It’s good to see someone is civil,” he remarked.

“Welcome, Heike-san,” Sakura said, but her eyes flicked towards Rei, who leaned against the opposite wall. Her tone was loaded when she continued, “And Ogami. Well done.”

Rei nodded back to her, although from the way his hand clenched, he wanted to do more.

*Why are we all so stilted?* Toki wondered. *What the hell is wrong with all of us?*

“Where’s Yukihina?” He asked, in order to take attention off of Sakura, and maybe allow them to sidle off down the hallway and make out in an abandoned cleaning closet, or something.

Heike’s lips thinned. “He’s taking a minor detour. He’ll be along shortly. He said to pass on his congratulations to everyone—”

“No he didn’t,” Yuuki interrupted. “He said, ‘I don’t just love you, anymore, Masa. She’s family. That’s not going to change.’”

There was a moment of silence when everyone digested that.

“So, he’s with Rui, then?” Toki ventured.

Heike let out a long, aggrieved sigh. “I don’t understand what he sees in that uncouth woman. A re-code,” he hissed, as if that mattered to anyone anymore.

“Yeah, you need to get over that,” Toki muttered. “More importantly, why are you here?”

“Can I not simply pay respects to honored friends and enemies?”

“No,” Yuuki said bluntly.

Heike cast his eyes skyward. “Yukihina has a prenatal checkup. Also, Rui may die. I’m hopeful, but not overly so.”

That should have garnered some sort of response from Sakura, but she and Rei were too busy staring holes into each other to be much help. That meant sane conversation was up to him, as per just about always.

“Maybe let’s talk about something else before Yuuki kills you,” he said. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and finish the story? Tell us what happened after the kingdom fell.”

“Didn’t they tell you?” Heike asked.
“Kind of ran out of time,” Toki admitted.

“Where did you get to?” Heike smirked, looking well pleased to be able to tell the story with his own flair.

“Kyo killing King Matsuhiro, Kouji getting blasted by Hikari’s Box, Karin and Takehiro sealing away Asura . . .”

“I missed all that,” Yuuki muttered. “Damn, that sounds more fun that mowing down countless demons. They were all the same. So tedious.”

“So nothing into the aftermath of the fall of the kingdom?” Heike mused. “I see.” He glanced back over his shoulder at Rei and observed, “You know, I am all for tasteful sexual liaisons, but the smoldering is getting to be a bit much. Either find a cupboard or listen to the story, please.”

As this was exactly in line with his own feelings as to the matter, Toki said nothing at all. It was a struggle to agree with Heike, even at the best of times. Particularly as he’d seen his lost form.

Ugh, his lost form—

“Then, I shall briefly tell you all of importance,” Heike said, as Sakura settled back down next to Toki, and, after a moment of hesitation, Rei came to hover over her shoulder. “Kyo had sided with Fujiwara after discovering his Father’s treacherous deal with the demons, which led to the end of the kingdom. With Fujiwara and my aid, Kyo attempted to rebuild the kingdom, but it became clear within a few months that the land was blighted, and a new home was needed. We moved to Japan, where Matsuhiro had held serious holdings—including what would become known as the Diet Building. It was there that Kyo established Eden, and took on the title Code:Emperor. He refused anyone to call him King—although we all did, of course. In private at least.

“He installed Sakurako, Zed, and myself as his lieutenants, the Four Founders. In honor of his service, Fujiwara was named his second-in-command, powerless as he was. Within a few years, however, a rare-kind woman came from Takama-ga-hara, begging for a home for her people. Her name was Rin, and in return for ending the millennia long war against her people, giving them aid in succor in their desperate plight, all he asked was that she marry him.”

Toki glanced over at Rei out of the corner of his eye. His face was wrapped up entirely, so no one could see his expression, but he imagined there was a tightness in the set of his shoulders that showed just how hard it was to hear about his parents, years after their death.

“He needn’t have issued the ultimatum, however,” Heike tutted. “It was clear how desperately in love they were with each other. Their union led the way for a brief period of integration between the two peoples, and other couples found their happiness, as well. Your parents among them, Sakura, dear.”

Heike smiled gently at her, honestly fond of the rare kind. Toki wondered if there wasn’t a way to harness the power of Sakura’s overwhelming popularity and use it as a peace-keeping measure.

“That was a golden time. Rare kinds and power users in accord, Kyo and Rin happy, Yukihina and I—well. All were happy enough, I suppose. Except for Fujiwara Souri, in retrospect. He was concerned about loose ends. Kouji had never been found, and it was difficult to believe that the Hero of Takama-ga-hara had been killed by the blast that had taken out half the palace. Also missing were his cousin, Karin, and Fujiwara Hideyoshi’s most trusted associate, Shibuya Takehiro. Their fates plagued Fujiwara, and he would not rest until he had known what had happened to them. He sent Sakurako to find word of them, and that was when she found your father
“But what about Kouji?” Sakura asked. “What did happen to him? Obviously he didn’t die, but where did he go?”

Heike raised an eyebrow. “I’m not privy to that, unfortunately. All I know is that Zed eventually found him, back when your mother and Shibuya were newly married. I cannot tell you what transpired between them, but it laid the foundation for their partnership in the Re:Code. Perhaps you can ask them when the timing is better?”

Sakura nodded, and Heike retook his tale.

“After Shibuya and Sakurako decided to marry, Karin and Maka disappeared, staying well away from Eden until the present time. Sakurako and her husband eventually came back to Japan, just in time to announce their pregnancy within a few months of Kyo and Rin’s. Other such matches had taken place, and clearly Ai and Mishiru were conceived around the same time. The children were born healthy, and for two, perhaps three years, all was well.”

Heike sighed. “But Rei was something of a late bloomer, and it appeared that he, the Code:Emperor’s child, was neither a power user, or a rare kind. He appeared completely normal, and Kyo refused to have a child with a power user woman, even to preserve the royal line. He announced that the royal line would die with him, and that Eden, as we were already beginning to be called, would be a republic henceforth.”

“Oh oh,” Toki muttered, seeing where this was going.

“Indeed,” Heike agreed. “Fujiwara did not take this well, nor did most of the power users. Tensions mounted steadily, and in order to keep the people from revolting, Kyo enforced the dissolution of all power-user and rare-kind marriages, save for his own. Fujiwara pushed for a quarantine of rare kinds, save for his own. Fujiwara pushed for a quarantine of rare kinds, citing Rin’s safety. Children were taken ostensibly to be ‘protected,’ but, as we know from Sakura’s case, they were studied and psychologically tortured instead. To this day I still do not know if Fujiwara truly was trying to protect them, or if he was trying to push for war, but the Code:Emperor reacted badly, and cut ties between them.

“You know what happened next,” Heike sighed. “Fujiwara twisted Soutarou’s mind with lies and falsified information, leading him to be thrown out of the Code:Breakers, as we were just beginning to be called. He sent him after Rin and Rei, claiming that they were the ones at fault. Hitomi was unable to stop him, and Rin was killed protecting her son. The few rare kind children, as well as Mishiru, who was shadowing Rei even then, were caught up in the furor. Meanwhile, Fujiwara had organized an uprising between the rare kinds and power users, and Kyo was caught in between them. He killed many, including the vast majority of the rare kinds.

“Dying from his injuries, he staggered into his home to find the walls painted with the blood of the scientists and researchers; Fujiwara huddled in the corner; his adopted son with his hand around his wife’s throat; his son dying and missing an arm; a rare kind boy and a child assassin grappling, and a rare kind girl manifesting a great cube of power between her fists. His dying act was to somehow infuse his son with his power, for he was far too weak to take on Soutarou and live. It was a senseless act, perhaps, although he was no doubt moved by love, and respect for his son’s resolve.”

“Still, it would have been for naught had Sakura not managed to create a box of her own,” Heike finished airily. “December 32nd went down in history as the bloodiest battle of the modern times, not because it in any way resembled the loss of life from the Demon War, but because it happened at the heart of our new kingdom, and there was no support structure afterwards. People blamed Fujiwara in those early days. It was why he retreated to the shadows ever after. It took him some
time to recover his former position.”

“And the Re:Code rose in opposition,” Toki murmured, remembering the tale from other tellers, told six years ago. “Zed told us that he’d met the other rare kind children and took their deaths; finally realizing he had been tricked by Fujiwara, Soutarou found Ogami and raised him to be the soulless bastard we all know and love—”

Yuuki smacked the back of his head.

“Soutarou eventually found Kouji and Zed and assembled the rest of the Re:Code—” Yuuki said.

“I was adopted by my mother’s cousin’s descendent, while Mishiru was retaken by Eden, and Ai was raised with the other rare kinds under Zed’s protection . . .” Sakura mused quietly.

“And Yukihina, having learned that I had supported Fujiwara through two bloody revolutions, betrayed me,” Heike finished, voice turning grim. “Let’s not forget that.”

“Jeez, we get it. You’re in love,” Toki muttered, just as Yuuki did much the same.

“Kind of a one-track mind, isn’t he?”

“Regardless, all that is in the past,” Heike said, giving both Toki and Yuuki severe looks. “Your efforts laid the ghosts of December 32nd to rest six years ago, and now that Hikari’s Box is destroyed and Asura is sealed for all time, any outstanding matters on the Demon War has ended as well. It is the end of an era, and I for one look forward to what the future holds.”

“It’s not over until Pandora’s Box is destroyed,” Sakura murmured.

Rei shifted forward, but Heike beat him to it. “What do you mean by that, Sakura?”

She looked over at him, her jaw set in what was now, after seeing her father in the dream memories, a very familiar expression. “It’s not completely destroyed. Not while what powered it is still in the world.”

Toki didn’t like the sound of that. One impending death in twenty four hours was enough for him, thanks. “Uh, Sakura, not to be a downer or anything, but—”

“Wait, what are they doing here?” Yuuki muttered.

Toki assumed he had heard someone walk in, but then Rei stiffened and shifted so that he blocked Sakura from view. Heike shifted his long frame around, crossing one leg delicately over the other as he turned to face the newcomers.

“I’m surprised to see you break quarantine,” Heike said. “Surprised and a touch disappointed.”

“I called them here, Heike,” Sakura said. “We’re going to need them.”

“Sorry we’re late,” Mishiru said quietly, tugging Ai along by the hand when he dug his heels in and refused to come within ten feet of them. “We hit some traffic on the way here.”

Completely ignoring Rei’s attempts to loom protectively, Sakura stood and embraced the ex-assassin, and then Ai. “We’re glad you’re here,” she said, and probably meant it too. “We have much to discuss,” she continued, gesturing to herself, Ai, Mishiru, and Ogami.

“Oh?” Ai asked, giving Ogami an oddly dark look. Toki frowned. Hadn’t they been ok when the
war ended? Why was he getting all growly now?

“Yes,” Sakura said firmly, before dropping the bomb on them. “Because Pandora’s Box is never going to be undone until we are no more.”

Since they had returned from their successful mission to eliminate Hikari’s Box, Takehiro’s worries had become few, but crystal-clear. His ex-wife was fine, and if he knew her iron will, so would Zed. He expected them to be up and raring to annoy someone in just a few hours, and personally, he thought Toki would be a great candidate for that. Rui was still in her coma, although he suspected she was more embarrassed than anything, and he fully expected the power of love to pull her through.

His daughter was fine, his not-quite-a-son-in-law-just-yet was fine, Toki had only broken his arms and thus was annoying, but fine . . . everyone was fine except for the woman on the bed in front of him.

Takehiro rested his head in his hand. The other was wrapped around Karin’s wrist, both to offer comfort (should she still be able to feel it) and also to register her pulse. It beat slow and unsteady, so much like how it had been during her two year coma after they had first faced Asura.

“Goddamnit, Red,” he whispered. “How many times are you gonna do this to us?”

For us it was indeed. Maka lay at Red’s side, curled around her like she had done for much of her childhood, leading into her teenage years when they had raised her in secret in the rare kind enclave. Maka was hooked up to her own IV, although it looked to be doing little to combat her own exhaustion and pallor.

Maybe Karin had been right, the other day, he thought. Red had been worrying about Maka overusing her powers to show the younger generation their story, and hurtling towards her Code:End.

‘She’s not sleeping, Takehiro, nor eating,’ she had said, eyes wide and nervous. ‘I think something’s wrong.’

Takehiro had assured her all was well, that it was just stress, but now he was beginning to wonder . . .

The door creaked open and Kouji stuck his head in. His expression darkened when he saw his cousin and her adopted daughter on the bed.

“No change?” He murmured, coming closer to rest his hand on Karin’s ankle, beneath the thin hospital blanket.

Takehiro shook his head. “There won’t be. Not until the end. Kouji, you should be here for that.”
“It’s not over, Takehiro,” Kouji said, his voice clipped. “She’s not done. I would know.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

Kouji’s mouth twisted. “Wasn’t it you who said the Shihoins were immortal? Maybe you should have more faith in her.”

Takehiro turned and looked at him. Really looked at him, even though it meant tearing his attention away from the girls on the bed. Kouji was pale, his gaze was unfocused . . . he was as unsteady as Takehiro had ever seen him, and more than that, he looked afraid.

*He thinks he’s going to lose both of them,* Takehiro realized. *Maybe all three: Rui and Karin and Maka."

“Be that as it may, I’ll leave you alone for a moment. Let you do you Shihoin family pep talk, then,” he said, standing. “I gotta tinkle.”

Takehiro took his time in the men’s room. He was exhausted, in physical pain, and emotional distress. He’d thought he’d never feel so helpless and useless after his daughter was taken from him, and his wife left him to rejoin the organization that had enslaved and then annihilated his people. This . . . was not as bad, but damn, it was close. Karin had been his friend and sister for over a hundred years, and all that would end within the next few hours, if the doctors were to be believed.

Takehiro looked at his reflection in the mirror and felt a lot like weeping.

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By the time he made his way back to Karin’s room, he expected Kouji to be gone. He was surprised to find him still within, standing with his head and shoulders bowed.

“Did you change her mind?” Takehiro asked, trying for lighthearted.

“I told her that I would accept her decision,” Kouji admitted. “And that her history has made me want to change my own. I won’t waste any more time, and neither should she. If she wants to . . . to go to Hideyoshi, then she should. Otherwise, I expect her to wake in the next few hours.”

Kouji’s gruff appraisal of his own goodbyes took Takehiro by surprise, and he smiled painfully. “Always the commanding officer,” he said. “Watch her do neither, just to piss you off.”

“If she takes longer than Rui to wake, I will keep vigil with you,” Kouji promised. “For now . . .”

Takehiro waved him off. The Shihoins were their own breed, and had their own way of doing things. Kouji loved his cousin, but he needed to be with Rui. It was as he’d said—he’d wasted enough time. “Go on. I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

Kouji laid a hand on his shoulder, a moment of solidarity. Then he was gone, leaving Takehiro alone with his thoughts. He took Red’s hand again, marvelling at the thickness of her fingers, so like his own. Even now, after a century of friendship, her foreignness struck him. He wondered, not for the first time, at how a traditional man like Hideyoshi could have seen that same foreignness and found it alluring, where he only found it reassuring because it was *her.*
Then again, Souri had seen the same thing in her. Maybe they had somehow been primed to be
drawn to what was different? Was attraction to foreigners genetic?

Rather than think about the former Prime Minister, Takehiro tried another tack. “You know,
you’ve waited a long time for this,” he said, half to her, half simply speaking his thoughts out loud.
“And after all these years of being divorced and forcibly separated from my wife, I get it. I mean,
I’m happy that Sakurako found someone else—although if it hadn’t been Zed I’d have serious
questions—but I couldn’t do that, and neither could you. I know how much you loved Hideyoshi,
and what it must have meant to live without him.”

He swallowed thickly, and began to rub her fingers with his own. “I’ll miss you forever, because
I’ll probably have that long, at this rate,” he muttered. “But it’s up to you. It’s always been up to
you. And I’m so glad you held on this long, because it made it way easier to be lonely in Japan
while all my students and friends and family were at war with each other, knowing that you and
Maka were a continent away, and safe from the conflict, but if you choose to go . . . I won’t hold
you back. Not that I could, I guess, but you know what I mean. You always know what I mean. Oh
damn it, Red, you’re making me say goodbye. Don’t you remember what goodbyes do to me?
Tears, Red,” he said thickly, as tears began to track down his face. “Tears are what happen. See?
They’re happening already. You terrible woman. I’m crying, and it’s all because of you.”

Takehiro let himself cry for a time, holding Red’s hand and mourning the loss of his family. When
his sorrow ebbed, sure to return when his friend finally stopped breathing, his thoughts drifted
tiredly. They centered on happiness, and what had to be done to attain it. He’d lost his, but had
begun finding it again with this new generation of power users. And not just in his teacher-student
relationship with Toki, Rei, Yuuki, even Rui, but foremost with the relationship he’d been able to
forge with his own daughter, something he’d thought he’d lost when he’d initially refused to
divorce his wife.

Sakurako had found hers in the renewal of her friendship and then relationship with Zed, and vice
versa. Kouji had found a measure of peace with his friendship with Yukihina and in raising Rui,
along with helping to steer Soutarou away from fratricide, even if he could not turn him away from
his bloody ambitions to slay Fujiwara, and end Eden. Heike had found purpose in Eden, and more
recently, happiness with Yukihina.

Everyone had found something, or they had died. Now Karin, who was among the last vestiges of
that fallen kingdom, was in the midst of making her choice.

Maka as well, Takehiro realized, picking up his head to examine the younger woman. If Karin was
correct and she had been hastening towards her Code:End, was that not her answer to the question:
change, or die? She didn’t look so well as it stood—not only was her pallor not improving, she
looked noticeably worse since she’d entered Karin’s room.

“Oh, shit,” Takehiro breathed, releasing Karin’s hand and rushing to the other side of the bed. He
shook Maka gently, hoping he’d be wrong and that she would be easy to rouse, but his fears were
proven correct. Maka did not wake, not even when he shook her hard enough to shake the bed.

Takehiro slumped back down into his chair, his sense of loss doubled. Maka was not resting; she
was actively using her power. She was doing what she had once done as a child in an effort to
connect with Karin. Whether it was to save her, or sink down into oblivion with her Takehiro did
not know, but apparently the loss of her surrogate mother was too much for her to bear.

Takehiro, who was in a position to lose both women, his first ‘family,’ put his head back into his
hands, and awaited the end.
Sakura should have expected the level of uproar that followed her proclamation. Really, what was she thinking to say something so dramatic? It wasn’t until Rei and Ai stepped close to each other, and Toki began muttering something about apocalypses and bucket lists that she stepped in and clarified, “Perhaps I misspoke. It would be more accurate to say that the box won’t be undone until we are no more in the current time.”

Rei turned back to her, as if the sound of her voice was a lure he could not resist. Romantic and ridiculous and only halfway true, Sakura chided herself, even as she sought out the mask covering his face for some sort of emotion. Impossible, when he was in his invisible lost form, but she did it anyway.

“Ok, so that was only partway helpful,” Toki muttered, but Yuuki caught her meaning.

“Ah, if you’re considering time as a stream . . .” He said, “Yes, I see where you’re going with this.”

Sakura nodded at him, hoping to portray more confidence than she felt. “I don’t consider it as anything at all, Yuuki. I simply suspect that we cannot close the box in the present, therefore, we must close it in the past. Somehow, our being here keeps the box from disintegrating, and in order to lay the threat of it’s reforming—or reopening—we must go back to the source of all this, and cease it from echoing through time.”

That speech drew a round of surprised looks from everyone around her. Except for Rei, who chuckled quietly under his breath.

“What?” She asked, feeling a bit put out. “I did get a law degree from Tokyo U!”

“I’m finding you more attractive, again,” Yuuki said, before Toki changed the subject quickly, likely to keep Rei from throttling Yuuki.

“Great, so you all want to go back traipsing into the most dangerous—well, second most dangerous, apparently—point in our history just so you can keep an imaginary powerful box from opening again and killing us all? Um, can we take a vote? I vote hell no.”

“How would you even do it?” Heike asked, less worried than intrigued.

“No, don’t even start,” Yuuki said, surprisingly in agreement with Toki. “Time travel is fun in theory, but actually trying to do it on purpose would be a mess. You’re lucky you all got here in one piece as it was.”

Sakura winced before looking directly at Heike. “I . . . I imagine we would have to recreate a negation in order to have enough power so that I could re-open the box. Otherwise—”

“No,” Ai said flatly. “Absolutely not.”

“Ai,” Mishiru said, her face pale. “We need to hear Sakura out. Even if—”
“Absolutely not,” he stressed, turning to face his lover. “Mishiru, you know what’s at stake!”

“And if the box opens again, and someone finds a way to harness its power?” Mishiru said quietly, looking up at him.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Toki asked.

“Well, we’ve all just experienced Hikari’s box re-opening. Can you imagine how much worse it would be if my box opened?” Sakura pointed out, wondering why no one was listening to her. Well, except for Rei, who was doing nothing but listen to her, and why wasn’t he speaking up? Whose side was he on? Did he agree with her, or did he not?

“Yeah, but you’re not being jerked around by a demon lord,” Toki pointed out. “And now that my shitty old dad is dead, the chances of you being forced to open the box are—”

“Existant,” Rei said, speaking for the first time since he’d joined them. “And thus we need to address them. Sakura is right. We cannot allow there to be any chance of the box re-opening. And if we have to go back in time to do it . . . then that is what we must do.”

His tone of finality quieted everyone, and Sakura felt a faint glow of pride. She had been struggling with her epiphany since the moment she’d had it, but to know that Rei was unquestionably on her side made her feel like it was them against the world, just as it had been at the beginning of their journey six years ago.

Ai stepped up, bristing. “No,” he said again, his rage barely contained. “You can’t make that decision for us, Ogami. I won’t let you.”

Sakura’s breath caught in her throat. Ai’s threat was clear, and with Rei’s loss of power, he was too weak to face him squarely. With Toki and Yuuki so injured, it relied on Heike, who could defeat Ai . . . but would he? Or would he take it one step too far?

The matter was settled by Mishiru. She stepped forward and took Ai’s hand, and then calmly, without warning, slapped him hard on the butt.

The room fell silent, although Heike could not quite stifle the appreciative whistle through his teeth.

“Darling,” Mishiru said, sweetly. “Attractive as I find you when you are being inhumanly stubborn, why don’t you just tell them why you’re so against it?”

“Did you just spank me in public?” He hissed.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “I’ll do worse.”

Ai fell silent, and licked his lips. “You tell them,” he finally said, when it looked as if his odd moment of arousal was over.

(Yes, Sakura knew exactly what arousal looked like. Between her roommate’s romantic comedies and exhibitionist boyfriend, she’d had quite an education. Why everyone thought she was a total innocent was beyond her, but as she found it somewhat useful, she’d wait to correct them.)

Mishiru looked back to the group and smiled apologetically before announcing, “I’m sorry, everyone. Ai is just worried for the baby.”

Sakura’s brain screeched to a halt.
So had Toki’s, apparently. “Baby?” He asked. “Wait, you mean Yukihina’s baby? Why on earth would you care about Yukihina and Heike’s magical lovechild?”

“Uh oh,” Yuuki muttered, quicker on the uptake.

“Oh, no,” Mishiru said, smiling widely. “Not that baby. We meant to tell you, but with the box and the dragon and who knew what else excitement we figure it was best to wait. I’m pregnant!”

Things happened very quickly after that. Ai slipped out of Mishiru’s grip and bodily checked Heike, who had, almost as quickly, stood and began to shed his coat. Ai took him to the floor in a tumble of limbs and in a few efficient movement, pinned him to the floor.

“Little help, Rei?” He grunted, as Heike thrashed wildly.

“You idiots!” Heike cried. “Another half-blood child? Did you all forget what happened the last time one hit age five?”

Rei and Sakura intersected as he went to help Ai restrain Heike, and she went to stand with Mishiru. She slipped an arm around the ex-assassin’s waist before scolding Heike.

“This is exactly the sort of attitude that should have died along with the prime minister,” she said. “The war won’t end with hate and fear living in our hearts.” Hoping either her words or Rei and Ai’s efforts would subdue Heike, she turned and hugged Mishiru tightly.

“I’m so happy for you both,” she whispered in her ear, and meant every word of it.

“We wanted you to be the godmother,” Mishiru whispered back. “It’s only first trimester, so it was too early to tell anyone, but we’d hoped you’d say yes. We’d already asked your father to be the godfather, and he was the only other person who knew.”

Sakura bit her lip, feeling her eyes sting with tears. In that moment she felt so utterly blessed to be surrounded by her friends and comrades; all the people she loved best. The six years of exile were at an end, now, for no matter what happened in the future, they were tied together by bonds of love, friendship, and now, with the impending births of Mishiru and Yukihina’s children, a whole new generation.

“I would be honored,” she assured her, pulling out of the embrace. “And I look forward to discussing this in more detail, later. For now . . .”

Mishiru sighed. “For now we should probably make sure our boys don’t kill Heike-san.”

From the floor, the Founder gurgled his appreciation for that idea.

“Oh, let him up,” Toki said. “He’s not gonna get all glowy, he just had to make his opinions known. We need to hash this out before the adults get out here and do something drastic so we don’t send the four them back in time. Congrats on the baby and everything, but does anyone know how to send them all back in time?”

Here was the sticking point. Sakura adopted her best innocent expression before admitting, “Not as such. But I imagine desperation will serve us well. It always has before.”

“Nyanmaru, ‘time’ as a human construct is not as simple or as malleable as you clearly want it to be,” Yuuki said, sounding a touch frustrated. With his childlike veneer, it was easy to forget he was a superhuman genius, but at times like these she was reminded. “You can’t just open a door and find yourself in the 19th century.”
“The box sent us here,” she argued. “It can send us back.”

“But then you’d have to open it,” Ai said, brushing off his pants before taking his place at Mishiru’s side. “And if any trace of the negation remains . . .”

“We’d all be boned,” Toki finished, glumly. “Dad would get his belated victory. Fuck that, there’s gotta be a different way.”

Sakura looked over at Rei, wishing for the tenth time that hour that he wasn’t in his lost form. If only she could see his expression! He wasn’t speaking much, which wasn’t helping either.

Well, if he wasn’t going to offer up his opinion, she would elicit it. With her customary bluntness, she stepped close to him, looked up at his completely covered face, and boldly used his first name when she asked, “What do you think we should do, Rei?”

He looked down at her—or at least, she assumed he did—and took her hand in his. Directly in front of everyone. Sakura felt a bit faint. What was next? A reprise of their kiss in the kitchen?

“We need to close that box,” he said bluntly. “You’re gonna have to open it, and we’ll have to weather the consequences.”

“On how many legs does a table stand?” Yuuki muttered. “Why do I feel like this is important?”

“Wait, what?” Toki asked. “Three, right? Unless it’s a weird IKEA table, in which case it’s two legs and a wall.”

“How did you know about that?” Sakura asked. “You missed that part of the story.”

“Kouji said it a couple nights ago,” Yuuki said. “I heard him, and he thought it was important. It feels important now.”

“Maybe it is,” Rei said again, because now that he was holding her hand he was on a roll, apparently. “Toki had it—the answer is three. If all four of us are what powers the box, maybe it’s not that we should all go back in time. Maybe only two of us should.”

“That makes it exponentially more dangerous,” Toki pointed out. “The four of you can take on anything, even with a pregnant Mishiru. But if it’s only two of you . . .”

“And I have to be one of them,” Sakura said, trying to keep her enthusiasm from dipping. “I’m the one who made the box, so I have to be the one to unmake it.”

“Well, that decides it, then,” Toki said, leaning back and hissing in pain when he jostled his broken arm. “If Sakura goes back, Angstgami will go back with her, and then Mishiru and Ai can stay here and have the baby in the 21st century.”

No one had any immediate objections. Sakura looked down at the hand Rei was still holding, and her heart began to race. Going back in time alone with him, after six years of strict segregation (on her part, at least)? She dreaded the decision because it would put her beyond the reach of her family and friends, but the thought of all that time with Rei made her dizzy with joy.

“This is an incredibly dangerous proposal,” Heike said, rubbing his temples. “The melee of December 32nd aside, there were rare kind purges carrying on for the next ten years. Shibuya was the only one granted neutrality, and I’m still not sure how he managed that. If you go back to that time, you’ll have to spend the rest of your life hiding from Eden, Shibuya, Karin and Maka—along with anyone who has ever known you in the present . . . along with fighting off whoever and
whatever they send after you.”

Rei’s hand tightened in hers, pulling her forward. It was not quite an embrace—perhaps he thought it wouldn’t be good for her to show any weakness—but it was comforting, nonetheless.

“Lighten up, Heike,” Toki said. “That’s why Ogami is going with her. You think he’s gonna let anything bad happen to her? Ever?” He scoffed. “Clearly you haven’t been paying attention to the last six and a half years.”

“We will miss you, Nyanmaru,” Yuuki said sadly. “And you too, Sixth.”

Sakura gave him a small smile. “We’ll see each other again, Yuuki. I promise.”

Heike gave her a sharp look, but she merely smiled blandly. With his power, it would be easy for Rei to prolong his lifespan, if he wasn’t doing so already. As for her . . . well, her father had taught her a few tricks or being a rare kind. Using her blood to unlock Pandora’s box and as a remedy for ‘going small’ was only the tip of the iceberg. She knew how to make a foolproof birth control, for one, and a blood and herbal mixture to drive out all infections from the body. She also knew, theoretically, how to prolong her own lifespan. Her father had shown her how, and the next century would be the best practice for such a technique.

Even if it didn’t work, or if she died in the past, it would be worth it to close the box . . . and to spend some time at Rei’s side.

Chapter End Notes

Oh hey, an update!
I am working on the next (and last) oneshot, and am about 40% through it? No idea when it’ll be finished, but just to let you know. Regardless, this story just does not know when to quit. Go, little story, go.

Works inspired by this one: Code:Shot #1 - A Modern Love Story by the_mythologist

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!