From Pauper to Prince

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Summary

When Prince Nagisa hears that he is arranged to marry Prince Haruka of Iwatobi, he is more than a little upset. In order to take his mind off things, his tutor Rei decides to take him to the town near the palace, where they meet a poor boy with a heart of gold.

Little did they know that this meeting would change their lives forever.

Notes

This fic is loosely based off the movie "Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper" (which in its turn is based off The Prince and the Pauper by Mark Twain.) It was one of my favourite movies growing up and I still nostalgically love it to this day, so the idea of writing a fic about my favourite characters with the plot of this movie was very appealing to me. At first I didn't want to do it since I already have a lot going on, but after the encouragement of some of my friends on Twitter and the excitement that just grew, I decided to write it. I did change some major points in the story, enough for it not to be an exact copy of the movie (so please don't sue me, Mattel.)

I started to work on this fic around the end of September 2016 and didn't really touch it again until now. I originally intended for this fic to be a one-shot but I soon realised that it would get too long for that so it's going to be a small multichapter. Parts of this fic have
already been written as of right now, so I hope that it won't take me too long to get the entire fic out.

Though this is a Royal AU, the setting is more in a fantasy world than in a historical one. Therefore, things like electricity and plumbing and things like that are there, but advanced technology like cars and computers aren't. And same sex relationships, though not as common, are not frowned upon.

Lastly, I just wanted to make clear that despite the description and plot of this story, there is no actual Nagisa x Haru in this fic. There is only MakoHaru and ReiGisa and both are important to the story.

I hope you enjoy!
As he was leaning against the railing of his bedroom's balcony, looking out over the gardens of the palace, a deep, melancholic sigh left Nagisa's lips. His usually joyful face was uncharacteristically painted with a frown. It was nothing like the childish pout that would present on his features if he had yet another meeting or lesson he didn't feel like attending, for once he felt genuine, unadulterated sadness, and rightfully so.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise that this would happen. He had seen it happen to all three of his sisters in the past so it was practically set in stone that this day would arrive for him as well. And yet he had been naïve, naïve and hopeful that being the youngest member of the royal family would free him from this inevitable fate. That he would be the one who would be allowed to marry someone not for the kingdom or wealth, but for his heart's desire. How could he have been so foolish?

The fact that a marriage had been arranged for him was oddly not what made him so upset. It was the person he was to marry, or rather, the person whom he therefore could not marry. That factor was the worst, for he had allowed his foolish self to become attached to someone, to fall in love with someone he could never have. Someone who would remain forever out of his reach.

"Your Highness, I heard you walked out of the measuring?"

Nagisa turned around to see his tutor, Rei, walking towards him. Although such a question coming from Rei's mouth would usually be painted with distress and panic, it was now laced with nothing but concern.

"It's just us, Rei. Can you drop the formalities?" Nagisa asked, his voice sounding out in a more sorrowful timbre than Rei had ever heard.

"Excuse me, Prince Nagisa. The tailors have been arranged to return tomorrow at noon. Please make sure you will be prepared for their visit this time."

Ignoring Rei's statement, Nagisa averted his magenta eyes, resting his chin on his palm. "Do you think he'll be nice?"

"Crown Prince Haruka? I am positive he is the most suitable candidate for marriage, for the King and Queen would not have selected him if otherwise."

"I didn't ask if he would be suitable. I asked if he would be nice."

Opening his mouth, Rei tried to look for words that could ease Nagisa's worries, but he closed it again when he ultimately couldn't find them. Every word that came to mind would be nothing but cruel, for they would not change the reality they both had to face. Even if Rei was not the one forced into an arranged marriage with someone he had never seen before, he would suffer the same loss his prince would, so he understood him all the same.

Another sigh left Nagisa's mouth. There was no way he could get out of this marriage. The relations with the neighbouring kingdom of Iwatobi had always been gruff, and an arranged marriage between the two princes would serve to strengthen the bonds and improve trade and therefore the economy in both kingdoms. The King and Queen of Iwatobi, King and Queen Nanase,
only had one son, Crown Prince Haruka, and though Nagisa had three older sisters, they had already been married off to dukes and earls of other kingdoms. Since Nagisa would never become king either way for he was not the heir to the throne, it was beneficial for his family and kingdom if he were to marry a king-to-be, especially since the kingdom of Iwatobi possessed far more wealth than his own.

The royal family of Iwatobi was rumoured to be cold and heartless, and though the paupers and beggars of his kingdom might claim the same about his family, those accusations made him cautious and even more hesitant towards this royal wedding. Being married off for the benefit of his realm and its people is one thing, but being forced to spend the rest of his life with a tyrant is a whole other story.

A flock of doves flew through the air and Nagisa eyed them with envy. Envy of their freedom. They were free to go wherever they pleased, without anyone telling them how to fly, when to return, or whom to mate with.

Although he was a prince, fourth in line to the throne, presumably a ruler of this kingdom, he felt like he was none of that. Rather, it felt like he was a puppet, a marionette forced to dance the way his strings were pulled. How could it be that he was told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it? It should be him telling others what to do! What else was he a prince for? It was truly unfair.

"Say, Prince Nagisa," Rei uttered, breaking the awkward silence that hung in the air between them, "how would you feel about today's lesson being a more... practical one?"

A bit startled by such an unusual proposal, Nagisa faced Rei, his previously dull eyes full of wonder at the question. "What do you mean?"

A gentle smile appeared on Rei's customarily serious face, his eyes softening behind his round, frameless spectacles. "Why don't you go grab your cape?"

The carriage wobbled a bit due to the bumps and lumps in the road as they made their way through the land. Nagisa couldn't believe it, he was actually going to the town! He could barely remember the last time he was allowed outside of the castle walls, and now Rei, stiff, uptight Rei was taking him to town instead of teaching him geography or science like he had been hired to do. Rei, who would never go against schedule or protocol, permitted him to skip out on his studies in favour of spending some time among the merchants and peasants to clear his mind from his duties.

Letting his eyes feast upon the vast world around him, Nagisa imagined the life he could have led if he were part of the common folk. How he would have preferred to have a simple life, born as the son of a merchant or a baker perhaps. Although Rei would not have been his tutor, he was sure they would have met in a different way, possibly at the bakery, with Rei as a customer and him as the boy behind the stall. That thought brought a smile to his lips. Regardless of how they would meet, fate would find its way, for Rei and he would be destined to be together. If only fate were as kind in this universe.

"Prince Nagisa?"

At the sound of Rei's voice Nagisa was pulled out of his daydreams, and he realised they had come to a halt. The ride to town was only about twenty minutes, but it had felt like much less than that. Rei stepped out of the carriage - which looked nothing like the carriage his parents travelled in as it belonged to Rei -, walked to the other side and offered his hand to assist Nagisa onto the ground as well. Then Rei went to talk to the groom at the stables and Nagisa looked around himself, taking in
the sight of the townsfolk going about their daily lives.

Every single person around him lived a life completely unbeknown to him, all with different names, families and occupations, different pasts, presents, and futures. Every man, woman and child that passed him had different memories, different thoughts and different dreams. Yet they all had something in common: they were the people of his kingdom. And despite this, he would never know anything about them or their lives. Still, Nagisa was convinced that their lives were far more easy and peaceful than his would ever be.

"Are you ready to go, Prince Nagisa?" Rei interrupted his pondering.

"Yes!"

They strolled through the town, blending in with the townsfolk. Nagisa was wearing the hood of his cape to prevent anyone from possibly recognising him - though the chances of that happening were very small, they didn't want to take any risks-, but that didn't stop him from excitedly looking around himself and pointing at everything that caught his eye, his remarks joining in with the rumble of the crowd. Rei silently listened to his prince and his wonders, a fond smile stretching his lips. The sight of commoners and their community was certainly nothing new to Rei, but it was to Nagisa, so he perfectly understood the joy of discovering something new that was befalling his prince. If anything, he was glad to see his old Nagisa return, the enthusiastic, youthful, animated boy he had come to know and love.

Passing the stands and stalls of merchants, Nagisa marvelled at the goods that were sold, and for such low prices too. He went from booth to booth, amazed by the wares until something from the next booth over stole his attention away. Though Rei usually preferred quick and efficient shopping, he was not bothered in the least by his prince's behaviour; he actually found it to be quite endearing. He would let Nagisa have his first - and possibly last - taste of freedom.

A sweet, delicious scent wafted through the air and entered Nagisa's nose, distracting him from the merchandise he was studying and he followed the scent to get to its source. The scent brought him to the stall of a baker. All kinds of pastries and cakes were displayed, the sight making his mouth water even more. He had always had a sweet tooth and a particular love for pastries of all kinds, so to see so many treats and desserts laid out in front of him made him feel like he was in heaven. Just as he was about to ask Rei which one he thought would be the tastiest, a loud wail cut him off, making everyone in the area turn to the noise.

"Now I finally got you, you little thief!" the baker yelped, sounding victorious. His hand was wrapped around the wrist of a child that couldn't be much older than five, maybe six years old. The child in question was holding a loaf of bread in her tiny hand, tears forming in her eyes and rolling down her cheeks as she tried to free herself from the man's grasp. The baker resumed, "Let's take you to the royal guard and see what they'll do with little thieves like you. They'll cut off your hand to teach little brats like yourself not to take what doesn't belong to you!"

At the mention of her hand being severed, the child began to struggle even more, so desperately that the loaf of bread was released and hit the ground.

Perplexed by such a scene unfolding itself in front of his eyes, Nagisa went over to the other side of the booth before he realised he was doing so.

"Excuse me, what seems to be the problem here?"

"This little brat here thought she could snatch away one of my goods without any sort of payment," the man spat, the venom in his voice making it clear that this was not the first time one of his
goods had suddenly disappeared.

"And what kind of payment did you have in mind for such a good?" Nagisa asked, already reaching for his coin pouch.

"Two silver pieces."

Nagisa opened his pouch and took a golden coin out of it. "I think this should suffice for both the loaf of bread as well as your troubles."

"Well yes, Sir, but what-"

"I think this child has learned her lesson now, haven't you?"

The little girl's eyes grew as big as saucers and she vigorously nodded her head.

"Then I think you can let go of her now."

The man was still completely dumbfounded at Nagisa's interference and released the child, then walked away from the scene to attend to different customers at the other side of the stall.

Before Nagisa had as much as a chance to speak another word, the girl retrieved the fallen loaf and ran away as swiftly as her little legs had taken her here in the first place.

"Aww," Nagisa pouted, "If she was stealing then she must have been hungry. I would have offered to give her more food... Oh well."

Rei was about to comment on the fact that lots of people in the realm were most likely ravenous and it would be impossible for him to feed every hungry mouth, but Nagisa had already wandered off to another booth. It wasn't odd that Nagisa didn't know about how many people were famished in his kingdom, for his studies did not exactly include the state of the people nor the ways of their monetary system. It was not that Rei did not want to teach him about it, but he had to follow the strict lesson plan that he was presented with. Yet he still needed to know about this, so perhaps taking him out to town was more educational than Rei initially thought. Perhaps that once he ruled beside Crown Prince Haruka over Iwatobi, his newfound knowledge would even save some folk, although it would not necessarily bring change here. That thought, though it may well be true, hurt nonetheless, if not for the reason it would normally hurt.

"Rei, are you coming?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I told you not to call me that, especially not here! What if someone hears you? Call me 'Nagisa'," Nagisa demanded.

"Yes, Pr- Nagisa," Rei corrected. The removal of Nagisa's title in the way he addressed him erased some kind of invisible distance between them, and though that thought brought a surge of warmth to Rei's heart, it frightened him more so.

They continued to leisurely stroll through the town, until they reached a part of the market that was a bit more calm, with fewer booths and fewer people. Along with the change of noise came a little change of scenery, for this appeared to be a part of town that was a bit less wealthy than the previous streets they wandered, though it did not seem to be reigned by poverty either.

"Hey Rei, can you hear that?" Nagisa asked, ceasing to move and holding out his arm in front of
Rei so he would do the same.

"What?" Rei questioned in return and it was exactly then that he could hear it too. The soft strumming of a guitar could be heard faintly in the distance, accompanied by a gentle voice floating through the air. It was not loud enough for Rei to make out what was sung.

"Let's go take a look!"

Before Rei had as much as the opportunity to agree, Nagisa had already wandered off again, now following his ears instead of his nose. Left with no other choice, he let Nagisa lead the way. The sound took them through bystreets and alleys until they reached a more open place, a small square of some kind. A crowd surrounded what they assumed to be the source of that noise, explaining the lack of people at the main street. Weaving his way through the townsfolk, Nagisa managed to get to the middle of the mass and saw what everyone was stopping for.

There in the center by the steps leading to another part of the town stood a young man, playing the guitar and singing some kind of song that Nagisa hadn't heard before, but most of the townsfolk around him did seem to know it, for some were quietly singing or humming along. The young man was quite tall, with messy, olive-brown hair and a kind expression on his handsome face as he sang the lyrics. His shoulders were fairly broad and he seemed rather muscular, yet his voice was contrastively light and airy, masculine yet not as deep as one would expect for a man his size. He looked like he could be a knight with that body of his. The only thing that contradicted this was the clothing he was wearing; they weren't torn but seemed to be old and worn out, covered in soot and dirt at places. No one appeared to be fazed or bothered by this, they only were enchanted by the young man's voice and let it take them on a journey of music. And so was Nagisa; his magenta eyes were blown wide and his mouth had fallen open, watching the performance with amazement since he had never seen anything quite like it before.

The last notes of the song thrummed out before it became quiet. Applause rang out and the young man bowed slightly in appreciation. Some stepped forward to drop a few coins into the cup that was at the musician's feet. Slowly the crowd dissipated before everyone was gone again, save for Nagisa and Rei, and the young man.

The young man didn't seem notice that some of his spectators remained and he sat down on one of the steps behind him, setting down his guitar next to him as well as the cup filled with his earnings and he opened the flagon he was carrying, taking a large gulp from its contents.

"That was amazing!" Nagisa exclaimed as he walked over to the young man, and Rei reluctantly followed his excited prince.

At the sound of Nagisa's voice the man looked up, a bit startled before kindly smiling at the pair. "Thank you, I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Up close Nagisa was met with the young man's bright green eyes, full of life yet somehow holding a very mature quality to them. No one he knew had eyes quite like those, shining with wisdom yet still so beautiful - though there was one certain pair of purple eyes he loved above all others.

Once more Nagisa took out his coin pouch and took two golden coins out of it, which he dropped into the man's cup. When the man saw what Nagisa had given him, he gasped before jumping up and stuttering, "I-I can't accept this! This is too much!"

"Is it?" Nagisa questioned, genuinely curious. Two golden coins didn't seem like much to him, so he didn't exactly understand why the young man was so flustered all of a sudden.
"It is!" the man pressed, "This is worth food for days!"

"It is?" Nagisa echoed, "Well, you deserve it. It was very amusing."

"I- Thank you, but-"

"I insist," he said solemnly, not leaving any room for argument.

"I- Thank you," the young man repeated, completely at a loss for words. Not knowing what else to do, he bowed again in gratitude.

"It's fine, it's fine!" Nagisa dismissed, waving his hand in front of his body. "So, what's your name?"

"Oh, I'm Makoto. Nice to meet you," Makoto said, nodding his head in greeting.

"I'm Nagisa and this is Rei," Nagisa introduced, "It's nice to meet you too, Makoto!"

"Nagisa? Ah, you have the same name as the prince," Makoto remarked.

"Yeah, well..." Nagisa trailed off, a somewhat guilty grin appearing on his face.

"Hmm?" Confusion could be read on Makoto's face, until realisation dawned upon him. "Oh! I'm so sorry, Your Majesty," he apologised and his face flared up as he bowed once more, "Please forgive my rudeness, I-"

"Oh, no no no, please raise your head! It's alright! Just call me 'Nagisa'."

"Ah, a-alright," Makoto replied awkwardly and he straightened his back, scratching at his cheek in a nervous habit. It was obvious that he felt very uncomfortable and out of place, knowing that he was in the presence of a prince. But what was a rather cramped situation for Makoto, it was an opportunity for Nagisa.

Growing up inside of the castle walls there were many times he had felt lonely during his childhood. The palace was not exactly the ideal spot for meeting potential friends and while there were the children of servants, they preferred to play among themselves. Then there were his sisters, but they were older than him and they too would rather enjoy each other's company than his own. There were servants that would play with him from time to time but it wasn't quite the same as having someone his own age. That was why Nagisa had been so glad when Rei was hired as his tutor. While at first Rei emitted nothing but utmost professionalism, over the course of the time they spent together Nagisa succeeded in cracking his shell. For the first time in his life, he felt like he truly had a friend and he was overjoyed. Little did he know that those feelings of friendship would evolve into something far greater.

Which led to why he had so eagerly approached Makoto. A friend was always what Nagisa had desired in his short seventeen years of life, and while Rei could be considered his friend, he knew that the feelings his heart held for Rei could not be described as simply feelings of friendship. He wanted someone who liked him for who he truly was, not for his title. Someone who wouldn't treat him differently just because of the life that had been decided for him at birth. In a week his life would change completely and he wanted to fulfill that wish of his before that time would arrive. And Makoto seemed like the perfect candidate; he had been kind to him before knowing of his status and he looked to be completely non-threatening.

"Allow me to re-introduce ourselves," Rei stated, speaking for the first time in Makoto's presence and he cleared his throat, "This is Prince Nagisa and I am his tutor, Rei. Pleasant making you
acquainted." He topped off his sentence with a small bow of his own.

A light chuckle escaped Makoto's lips at Rei's formality. "The pleasure is mine."

"So Makoto, you're a musician?" Nagisa asked, actually curious.

"Oh, no. I provide services in exchange for payment."

At the implication that those words brought with them, a bright blush appeared on Rei's face, and when Makoto realised what he had said, the shade of his cheeks darkened considerably too. The insinuation went completely over Nagisa's head.

"N-Not like that!" Makoto erratically waved his hands in front of his body as if to prove his innocence. "I mean, I'm more of an errand boy, really. I do odd jobs around the town."

"A-Ah, I see," Rei laughed awkwardly, appearing to be relieved but Nagisa didn't know the reason why. He made a mental note to ask Rei about it later.

"So singing is like, your hobby?"

"Not exactly. Not that I don't enjoy it, because I do, but it's more of a last resort."

When he saw the confusion on Nagisa's face, Makoto sat down on the steps again and silently invited Nagisa and Rei to do the same. Nagisa immediately plopped down next to Makoto like it was normal for him to do so and he took off his hood, but Rei was a bit more reluctant. Eventually he gave in and sat down for being the only one to remain standing felt too awkward.

"My father is a blacksmith," Makoto began, "I used to work at his shop - I still do from time to time - but with the small economic crisis that is occurring at the moment, the shop is getting less customers for people are quicker to spend their earnings on food and clothing and the likes of that. It's understandable, but we still need to put food on the table for our family. Since my father is able to handle the shop mostly by himself now, I try to find other jobs around the town in order to make the ends meet. It's easier said than done, though. Most people prefer to run their own errands since they can't afford to hire someone to do it for them. So on days I can't find work or when I finish early I come here to earn a little more. It doesn't earn much, but hey, every bronze coin is one, right?" he concluded his story with a little chuckle.

"Is your father, perhaps, Blacksmith Tachibana?" Rei inquired.

"That's right."

"Whoa, I'm surprised you know his father, Rei!" Nagisa said. He himself was still very much stuck at the part of 'the small economic crisis', but he didn't want to come off as the stereotypical naïve little prince that doesn't know what is going on in his kingdom - though arguably, that was exactly what he was - and possibly scare off his new friend. So he added it to his growing mental list of 'things-to-ask-Rei-later'.

"I don't know his father, I have simply heard of him," Rei explained, adjusting the spectacles on his nose, "Many have described him as the town's finest blacksmith."

"Thank you, I'm sure he would appreciate that," Makoto beamed.

"You're very welcome."

"You mentioned you worked as a blacksmith too, right?" Nagisa cut in, an idea popping into his
"Yes, I still do sometimes."

"Can I see your hands for a second?"

Surprised by such an unusual request, Makoto was taken aback for a moment before he nodded and offered out his hands. Nagisa took his right hand in both of his, studying the skin and bone structure. The fingers and palm of Makoto's large hand were calloused, presumably from manual labor as well as the strings of his guitar, yet it was still quite soft to touch. When he turned it around, he saw all kinds of little scars and cuts littering his skin, which was another sign of his hard work and efforts. Then he lifted Makoto's hand and pressed his own left hand against it. His hand was far smaller than Makoto's, his fingers thinner and more delicate. His skin was far more fair without any imperfections, the paleness standing out against Makoto's tanned fingers. In comparison, his hand was cold, regal and dainty, dwarfed by Makoto's warm, trustworthy and reliable one. Where the palms of two hands met, so did two different worlds.

It astounded Nagisa how their lives were so visibly contrasting, being able to tell one apart from the other simply by the look of their hands, like their hands told their history. If he had been born as the son of a blacksmith, would his hands have looked like Makoto's? Would Makoto's hands have been as small and delicate as his own if he had been a prince? That question made him imagine what Makoto would be like as a prince, with slicked back hair and wearing a well-tailored suit, attending banquets and conversing with lords and viscounts. Visualising this brought another smile to Nagisa's lips as he retreated his hand. Though he had barely met him, Makoto seemed like a very dependable man. One who would fulfill his duties without question or protest. He would be a virtuous and handsome prince.

Along with the vision of Prince Makoto came the wonder of Commoner Nagisa, son of a blacksmith. Picturing what his life could have been like made him feel a yearning for a life he would never lead. He could see himself waking up in the morning in a small but cosy house, eating breakfast at the table with his parents and sisters after which he would wander through the town looking for a job to do and if he could not find one, he'd sing his heart out on the town square. No duty. No protocol. Being able to marry whom he chooses. That seemed like the perfect life to him.

As if his mind had been read, Makoto suddenly spoke, sounding a bit hesitant. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course, ask away!" Nagisa grinned, trying to conceal the wave of envy that washed down upon him.

"Excuse me if this is rude, for I do not intend it to be, but shouldn't you be at the palace?" Makoto asked, clearly unsure if such a question would offend Nagisa, "It's just that I thought the royal family only left the castle walls for business and the likes."

Nagisa's face fell and he turned his head away. He had left the walls to run away from his troubles and to forget the bitterness of reality for a brief moment, and now he was confronted with it directly again. And what he feared most, was that admitting it aloud would make it definite.

"Forgive me, I should not have pried in what is not my business. I sincerely apologise."

"No, it's alright," Nagisa said as he lifted his head again, a melancholic smile on his face, his eyes set with sadness. "I was informed today that I am arranged to marry the prince of Iwatobi."

"Prince Haruka?"
"Yes. In a week's time a carriage will take me to Iwatobi to meet the prince and soon thereafter the wedding will follow."

"Next week? That's so soon."

"Much sooner than I anticipated; I won't even be able to celebrate my birthday here in the kingdom," Nagisa muttered, his cheerful voice toned down with gloom. He recovered himself and continued, "So Rei decided to take me to town instead of teaching me math like he usually would have, to let me savour my first and last taste of freedom and sight of this kingdom before leaving for good."

Makoto's mouth opened and closed, not quite knowing what he could say to this. His eyes drifted from Nagisa to Rei and back, catching the words that were not verbally expressed but were painted on both of their faces. "I'm sorry to hear that. But it is not like you can't ever return, right? You'll still be able to visit your family and loved ones." Those words had sounded more comforting in his head and he mentally hit himself for uttering them out loud. Seeing Nagisa and Rei in such a state made his heart ache and he wanted to do everything he could to soothe them. Alas, he was clumsy and had no experience in situations such as these.

"Perhaps..." Nagisa trailed off, implying that more words were resting on his tongue but he would not utter them.

A painful silence remained hereafter. None of the young men quite knew what to say after such an abrupt end to their conversation. Afraid to make things worse, Makoto kept his mouth shut, but Nagisa did not want to leave it like this. In order to be friends with Makoto, he needed to say something. His eyes searched for something to speak about and his gaze fell on Makoto's guitar.

"You said your family was quite poor, did you not?"

"Your Highness!" Rei scolded, "You can't just ask him something like that!"

"It's quite alright," Makoto appeased, chuckling lightly, "We are not starving, but it's true that we don't have many assets."

"Then how come you have a guitar? I thought instruments were something only for the wealthy and noble?"

"Oh, this?" Makoto patted the guitar. "It's a family heirloom. My father's grandfather made it, and it's been passed on ever since."

That meant that it was rather old already, yet it seemed to be in good shape still. It was probably important and treasured in Makoto's family, treated with care and caution. He couldn't imagine his own family having something like that, save for the throne and the title perhaps.

"I do not mean to disturb, Prince Nagisa, but I think it is time for us to head back," Rei interrupted, his pocket watch in hand.

"Already? But we just got here," Nagisa pouted, displeased with the fact that he had to leave his new friend this soon. Especially because he wasn't sure if he would ever meet him again.

"It's fine, I should probably get going too," Makoto said as he got up, patting the dirt off his clothes.

"Wait!" Nagisa yelped as he jumped up as well. "Will we see you again?"
"Sure." Makoto smiled and tilted his head to the side, the action making him appear younger and more boyish than he was. "I'll be somewhere around the town if I'm running an errand for someone, otherwise I'll be at the blacksmith's or here."

"Alright. I hope to see you again soon then!"

"Pleasure to make you acquainted, Makoto."

"Likewise," Makoto giggled in response to both Nagisa and Rei.

They said their goodbyes and Makoto watched as his newfound friends walked off. Nagisa turned around and waved at Makoto, which Makoto mimicked with a smile. He waited until they were completely out of sight before he picked up his belongings and began to make his way home.

Days passed and dread grew. As the date of Nagisa's departure came closer and preparations were made, it became more and more real that this was actually going to happen. It made him feel depressed, desperate and lonely, and he badly wanted to share his thoughts and feelings with someone. He wanted to be comforted and while he usually would have gone to Rei, he knew that that wouldn't be wise. Admitting these feelings to him would not change the arrangement that had been made with the kingdom of Iwatobi, it would only make it more difficult for him to leave. What he needed was to speak to someone who was without bias, who would not judge him for having these feelings. There was only one person that came to mind.

So when Rei went out to town to run some errands for the palace, Nagisa asked if he could come along. After convincing Rei that he would be alright by himself, Rei reluctantly agreed.

Now he was strolling through the town on his own, heading towards the place he had visited with Rei just a couple of days ago, but he was still attentively taking in his surroundings. When he arrived at the town square, he saw the person he was looking for sitting on the steps.

"Ma-ko-to," he sang as he approached Makoto, who looked up at his name being spoken.

"Nagisa!" Makoto exclaimed, pleasantly surprised at the sight of the prince. He most likely hadn't expected to actually meet him again, Nagisa concluded. "Rei's not with you today?"

"No, today Rei is the one playing errand boy," Nagisa joked.

"That's what he was hired for, yes, and he still tutors me, but he does much more than that," Nagisa said as he sat down next to Makoto, "He also makes appointments, runs errands, helps the bookkeepers, things like that."

When he finished speaking he turned to Makoto and saw that he was holding a dry piece of bread that didn't look very fresh. Just as he wondered if he was feeding the birds that were pecking around the square, Makoto spoke again.

"I see," he chuckled, before he looked down at the bread in his hands, "Oh, do you want some? I'm sorry, it's not exactly a meal befitting for a prince, but I don't have anything else to offer..."

"No, thanks. I've already had lunch," Nagisa declined. Even if that hadn't been true, it was not that he found himself to be too good for food like that, but he was not about to take away Makoto's
meager meal, especially as he was beginning to doubt just how honest Makoto had been about his family's prosperity; he suspected that his family was even poorer than he was letting on.

"Alright. Do you mind if I...?"

"No, of course not! Please continue."

Makoto nodded and took a bite out of the bread. As he chewed he tore a small piece off the bread and crumbled it between his fingers, throwing it out for the pigeons like Nagisa had initially assumed he was doing. Nagisa let him eat in silence, trying to collect his thoughts and put them into words to form coherent sentences with.

Once Makoto was finished, Nagisa asked, "Do you have some time?"

"Ah, I was actually about to go look for an afternoon job," Makoto replied awkwardly, "Why?"

"Oh," Nagisa said dejectedly. Despite what Makoto had told him about his life, Nagisa hadn't actually considered the possibility that Makoto would be busy. "I just wanted to talk with you for a while..."

Seeing the crestfallen look on Nagisa's face, Makoto resumed, "I have a few minutes to spare."

Though his words implied that he would do what Nagisa had wanted of him, it didn't really make Nagisa feel better for he knew that he was preventing Makoto from earning a living. Then he was struck with an idea.

"I know!" Nagisa blurted and he took five golden coins out of his pouch. "Hold out your hand."

Not knowing what Nagisa planned, Makoto frowned slightly in confusion but held out his palm like he had been instructed to. Nagisa dropped the coins in Makoto's hand. When Makoto saw just how much Nagisa had given him, he became flustered once more.

"I can't accept this!"

"Shush," Nagisa said with a grin, "I am requesting for you to provide me with one of your services."

"Now you're really making it sound like I do something else..." Makoto chuckled, "But thank you. I accept your request. What kind of service do you require?" he jokingly asked.

"Listen to the complaints of a troubled prince?"

Makoto smiled gently at him, his gaze full of understanding. "Of course."

"It's just-" Nagisa tried, wanting to formulate his thoughts properly, "Do you think it'll be okay?"

"What?"

"The marriage."

"With Prince Haruka?"

Nagisa nodded. "Do you think it'll work?"

"I'm sure it will."
At that statement Nagisa looked over to Makoto. He hadn't said in a way that would bid comfort to him; instead he had said it with certainty.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Arranged marriages usually work. Sometimes even better than marriages out of love."

A frown formed on Nagisa's face. "How so?"

Makoto pondered for a second, trying to find the best way to phrase what he meant. "Do you think love is a feeling or a choice?"

"A feeling, obviously," Nagisa declared, but when Makoto shook his head his frown deepened, "How not?"

Another gentle smile lit up Makoto's face. "You're not completely incorrect, but love is more of a choice than a feeling. When you first fall for someone, you have feelings of infatuation and affection for them, and yes, those feelings are love. But those feelings are not enough in the long run."

Makoto's words confused Nagisa greatly. They completely contradicted all the novels about romance he had read up until now. This confusion was clear on his face, for Makoto chuckled once more before he elaborated.

"When my mother first met my father, she was completely infatuated with him. They got married and as she got used to sharing a life with him, eventually that initial infatuation within her died out. She still loves him dearly, but just those feelings she had in the beginning of their relationship would not be enough to last a lifetime. During hard times, when they were hungry or concerned for the future, they sometimes took their frustrations out on each other. But that was not enough to destroy their marriage, because they both consciously chose that they would work in order to maintain their love and relationship.

"It is often found that marriages will have troubles in times of hardship, because both parties aren't willing to do their utmost best to save their relationship. They think that their love has died out because it does not feel the same as it did in the beginning. It is much easier to give up than to work hard, so that is when a marriage fails. But in an arranged marriage both parties start out not with that infatuation, but with hard work in order to form a steady relationship. And then it is much easier to keep working hard and those feelings of love will grow overtime."

Makoto kept quiet for a while to let Nagisa take in his words. Then he concluded,

"So I'm convinced that your marriage with Prince Haruka will work out just fine, if the both of you are prepared to devote yourself to making it work."

Nagisa understood what Makoto meant and he had to admit, his words made sense and held a point of truth. It was then that Nagisa realised that he didn't know if he was willing to devote himself to a marriage with Prince Haruka. Actually, he was quite sure he was not willing to do that.

"But sometimes it's really a feeling," Nagisa argued, "Sometimes you fall in love and you just can't help it. You know that it could never work out because of the circumstances, but you can't erase the feelings in your heart." He raised his hand and put it over his heart as he looked at his feet. "It was never your intention to fall in love and you wish you weren't, but your heart is much more powerful than your mind and there is nothing you can do to stop it, no matter how hard you try."

"I'm sorry," Makoto apologised sincerely, not only for Nagisa's situation, but also for making it
sound like there was nothing more involved than simple dedication. "But what you have to remember," Makoto continued after another pause, "is that Prince Haruka is not your enemy."

Feeling caught, Nagisa averted his eyes from Makoto again. Admittedly, whenever he thought about Prince Haruka or heard his name, he felt nothing but ill feelings. But he hadn't noticed that it was so obvious that he felt that way about his husband-to-be.

"If there's anyone who understands how you feel, it would be Prince Haruka. After all, he is in the same boat as you. He too is arranged to marry a complete stranger, even though he might have someone he holds dear, just like you do. He did not ask for this either," Makoto explained, "So it is not fair to feel that way about him. He is not at fault."

Makoto was right. Up until now he had only held feelings of detestation towards Prince Haruka, because he had only thought about himself. He hadn't realised that Prince Haruka most likely felt the same way about this marriage as he did. The resentment that he had felt was targeted at someone who was bound to the same fate as him. For the first time since hearing about their wedding, he felt something different towards Prince Haruka: pity.

"You know," Makoto uttered, staring out in front of himself, "before I met you, I used to be pretty envious."

"Of me?" Nagisa asked sceptically. He could not imagine that anyone would want to live a life like his, especially since he was the one who felt envious of the common folk.

"Hmm," Makoto hummed, "Of your family, your status, your life." When he saw the frown on Nagisa's face, he laughed lightly before he gave a clarification. "It just seemed like such a good life you know? Having everything your heart desires, only wearing tailored clothes of the finest fabric, have people serving you, all of that."

"It's not as good as you think it is," Nagisa commented, because it wasn't. Being a prince was truly overrated. It only brought him troubles.

Makoto didn't listen to what he said, but continued, "Feeling satiated after a meal. Sleeping in a soft bed. Getting educated. Knowing how to read and write. Never having felt cold. Not knowing what hunger feels like..." A sigh left his lips. "But I guess you have your own things to worry about, don't you?"

"You don't know how to read or write?" Oddly, it was this that Nagisa decided to comment on.

He shook his head in response. "I have never been to school. I've been working for over twelve years now. Mostly just running an errand here and there, it wasn't like I was already working at the shop or something like that!" Makoto chuckled when he saw the odd look on Nagisa's face.

Working at the age of six, Nagisa could barely imagine it. He always thought that commoner's children played around all day, without a worry or care in the world.

"That's why, when my brother and sister were born, I wanted to make sure they could go to school and enjoy their youth, that they wouldn't have to work like I had. They're getting educated, they know how to read and write, so they'll have more opportunities in the future. It took some sacrifices, but it makes them happy. And ultimately, that makes me happy."

"You must love them a lot. Your siblings."

To this Makoto nodded, a fond smile stretching his lips at the thought of his siblings. "I'll skip a meal if it means they won't feel hungry."
Though things like that were usually said rhetorically, Nagisa knew Makoto had meant it literally.

"Ah, but I've been trying to teach myself how to read and write, since I always wanted to. It's really difficult though."

"Maybe you can ask Rei to teach you!" Nagisa suggested. Usually he would have offered to teach Makoto himself, but with the circumstances being as they were, he would not be able to fulfill such a promise.

Once more, Makoto dismissively shook his head. "I could never pay him."

"Oh..." That was something Nagisa hadn't considered. It was not like he could expect Rei to work for free either.

"It's alright though. It's not like I would have time to study anyway, so it's okay."

Silence fell between them as Nagisa went over everything he had been told. Then it occurred to him that he had been wrong. About everything.

"You know, I actually felt the same as you. Envious. Of the common folk."

A smile of understanding appeared on Makoto's face. "I suppose we both wished things were different for us."

They talked some more, about everything and anything. About Rei, about Makoto's siblings and Nagisa's sisters, about Prince Haruka. When Nagisa asked if Makoto had a special someone he had laughed and claimed that he had no time for such things, that he was too focused on taking care of his family. Time flew by as they pleasantly conversed, and they had no idea how late it was when Rei came to retrieve Nagisa. He thanked Makoto for hearing him out and Makoto expressed his gratitude in return.

They bid each other goodbye once more as they went their separate ways.

The day before his departure Nagisa went back to the town one last time, in order to say goodbye to his kingdom and to say goodbye to Makoto. The carriage that would take him to Iwatobi would leave before dawn. Like he had been the previous times they had encountered each other, Makoto was at the town square. He seemingly had a lot of trouble finding a job lately, Nagisa presumed. They had chatted for a little while before they said their farewells. Although they had met just a week ago, it felt like they had been friends for much longer. Who would have thought that two completely different worlds wouldn't clash, but would be so compatible?

If his life were a romance novel, this would be the point where Makoto would tell him to follow his heart. But Makoto didn't. Instead of offering him words of comfort and soothing, Makoto had embraced him. Makoto had given him something he had never had in his almost eighteen years of life: arms of support wrapping around him and a broad chest to cry into. And though his heart felt like crying, Nagisa would not allow a single tear to leave his eyes. He repressed them, like he had been taught to do since birth.

When Makoto released him again, he had smiled, ruffled his blond locks and wished him good luck and happiness. Although it did not change Nagisa's feelings about his current situation, somehow it still made him feel a tiny bit better, if only for a little while. In that moment, it felt as if Makoto was his big brother and he felt cherished as a sibling in a way he had never felt from his
His life would completely change within twenty-four hours, but he would never forget Makoto and the friendship he had given him. They would be memories he would treasure forevermore.

That night Rei was walking through the palace corridors, heading to Nagisa's bedroom. The prince had been acting off all day and though he had successfully concealed it for most, Rei saw right through his façade. Nagisa might fool his family, the servants, the entire kingdom, but he could never fool Rei. He knew like no other how much this arrangement was affecting Nagisa, and Nagisa was more than a little impulsive. Lord knows what he might do.

Standing in front of Nagisa's door, Rei knocked a few times. When he did not receive an answer, he looked around himself to check the hall for any spectators before he entered Nagisa's room. He flipped the switch that lit up the chandelier that was hanging in the middle of the room. The entire room was empty with no trace of anyone having been here in a while; the bed was neatly made, the closets' doors were closed without any stray articles of clothing poking out between them, everything was tidy and in order. Except for one thing: the chair at his desk had been pulled back ever so slightly, indicating that someone had sat there.

Rei walked over to his desk and he saw a note in Nagisa's handwriting lying on top of it.

'I'm sorry.'

He silently cursed. To say that he was surprised would have been a lie. Yet he had expected - hoped - that Nagisa would use his head for once. Perhaps Nagisa's decision would make him feel grateful and glad later, but now it only made him panicked and distressed.

He snatched the note off of the desk and put it in his pocket in order to prevent anyone else from seeing it. Then he ran out of the room. Nagisa couldn't have gotten far and it was vital that Rei found him before anyone else noticed he was gone.

Every last chamber, hall and corridor was searched, but there was no trace of Nagisa in the entire castle. Desperate to find him, Rei stepped onto his carriage and left the palace grounds. There was only one place he could imagine Nagisa seeking refuge at. And if he was not there, then Rei would have to resort to plan B. Though he seriously hoped that wouldn't be necessary.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed. If you did, then please consider letting me know, because I'd love to hear what you think.

You can find me on Tumblr and Twitter @DatHeetJoella if you want to ask me something or if you simply want to chat.

Thank you, I hope you'll have a wonderful day and that I'll see you next time again ^^
Loud banging on the front door was what startled Makoto awake. He was disoriented for a second before fear invaded his senses. It was late at night and dark outside, and he had no idea who it could be. The thought of a robber or murderer being at his house frightened him immensely, but then his common sense reminded him that a robber or murderer would not announce their presence. So it must be a monster. Or worse, a ghost.

Consumed by fear, he was about to bury himself back underneath the thin blanket and try to convince himself it was just his imagination when he heard a voice.
"What was that?" his sister Ran sleepily mumbled as she pressed herself tighter against his body.

It was not his imagination. There was actually someone - or something - banging on their door. If it continued then the rest of his family would wake up too and he wanted to prevent that from happening, knowing that they needed their sleep. Who knows what the reason behind the knocking was; it could be a neighbour with an urgent problem, or perhaps someone who did have ill intentions and planned to somehow harm his family. No matter how afraid he was, he couldn't just stand by and do nothing while his family was possibly in danger. So he was left with no other choice but to go take a look.

"I'll go take a look, alright?" he proposed, though it didn't sound very confident.

"Hmm," Ran hummed, already back asleep.

Makoto stepped out of their bed and tucked his siblings back in.

There was no going back now.

Slowly he walked out of the room, trying to be as quiet as possible so to not rouse his parents and siblings. The floorboards creaked underneath his feet, the noise startling him a little and it made his heart pound even faster than it already did before. He saw a broom standing against the wall and he grabbed it. Though he didn't know what it would do against monsters or ghosts, having it in his hands made him feel just a tad safer.

Then the banging came again and he let out a little yelp. This was no time to be a coward, he reminded himself. He had to protect his family.

With the broom ready to strike, Makoto got closer to the front door. Holding his breath, he closed his eyes before he swung the door open.

"Makoto!"

At the sound of that familiar voice calling his name, Makoto opened his eyes and sighed deeply in relief.

"Rei." It was Rei. Not a robber, not a murderer, not a ghost, but Rei. But quickly enough his relief wore off and made place for confusion. And when he saw the dishevelled state the ever-neat Rei was in, his confusion turned into worry. "What's wrong?"

"Nagisa," Rei panted, "he's gone!"

"No," Makoto gasped in disbelief. Even though he knew just how much Nagisa was against the idea of this marriage, he never would have foreseen that he would run away from his responsibilities.

"I thought that he might come to you."

"He's not here; I haven't seen him since this afternoon," Makoto denied, "I'll help you look for him." He took a step forward.

"There's no time! The carriage leaves before dawn and Lord knows where he might be," Rei exclaimed, "Makoto, I need you to do me a favour."

"What is it?"
"Nagisa will get in big trouble if he doesn't show up and it'll impact the entire kingdom if the arrangement is cancelled, so..."

"Get to the point, Rei!"

"I need you to get on that carriage and go to Iwatobi to meet Prince Haruka in Nagisa's stead, pretend you are him."

"You're joking," Makoto stated, but when he saw just how serious Rei was about this, his mouth fell open. "Are you out of your mind?!"

"I know it is a lot to ask but-"

"There's no way they won't notice I'm not Nagisa. I look nothing like him!"

"They don't know what Nagisa looks like."

"Even then, how do you expect this to work? I can't pretend that I'm him for the rest of my life!"

"I don't know! I didn't exactly have the time to think this through, but it's an emergency. It's just until I've found Nagisa."

"Posing as a prince, I'll get arrested," Makoto whisper-screamed, "and hanged!"

"So will I, but Nagisa won't let that happen." Rei ran his hand through his hair. "I wouldn't ask this of you if I weren't desperate. Please, Makoto. I have no one else to go to."

A deep sigh escaped Makoto's lips. "All things aside, I would love to help you out, Rei, but I just can't. I can't just drop everything and leave the kingdom. I need to take care of my family. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"What if you got rewarded handsomely for your efforts?"

This made Makoto pause. "How handsomely?"

"So handsomely that your family will never have to worry anymore."

He almost couldn't believe it himself, but now he was seriously considering Rei's request. This past week it had been practically impossible for him to get a job and the shop had seen the least amount of customers yet. If it weren't for the gold Nagisa had given him, they would have gone hungry. And the prospect of possibly never seeing Nagisa again made his outlook on the future even more grim than it had already been. This proposal would not only help Nagisa and Rei out, but his own family too. It would be selfish to decline.

"Regardless of what happens to me... will my family still get the reward?"

"Yes, I will personally make sure that they will receive the payment. So please, Makoto. I beg of you," Rei pleaded as he bowed deeply.

Another sigh left Makoto's body. He was going to regret this later, he was sure. But he had no other choice. "Alright. I'll do it."

Relief washed over Rei as he straightened his back, "Thank you," he said, and Makoto had never heard anything sound so sincere. "We must make haste!"

"Wait," Makoto said and prevented Rei from stalking off with a hand on his arm. "I need you to do
me a favour too."

"And that is?"

"Write a note to my family. Right now."

"Your family can read?"

"My siblings can. I can't just leave in the middle of the night without a word, but there's no time to wait until they're awake."

"Do you have parchment and a quill?"

After they had composed a note for Makoto's family and Makoto had said goodbye to them with a kiss on their foreheads, Rei and he had left the house. The thought of leaving his family without their knowledge for an undetermined amount of time and nothing but a vague note to explain the reason he left, hurt Makoto deeply. They were still on their way to the palace yet he was already missing his parents and siblings. Worst case scenario, he might never see them again but he tried his best to shake that thought away, otherwise he might tell Rei that he couldn't do it after all and that he wanted to go back to his home. But he was a man of his word and ultimately, this would help them more than he ever could on his own. Though that didn't mean that it didn't hurt immensely.

There wasn't much time for him to feel homesick though, as Rei started to ramble about the arrangement. Although all of this was probably important, it was a little overwhelming and Makoto couldn't really follow him, for he spoke rapidly and used a lot of words that Makoto didn't know the meaning of.

When Rei noticed how clueless Makoto was, he ceased speaking and focused on the road instead.

"Aren't you worried about Nagisa?" Makoto asked quietly after a while.

"I am," Rei confessed, "As you may have noticed, Nagisa is not really aware of how the world works. He knows that he can trade gold in exchange for goods and services, but he does not know the value of things. But sadly, I don't have time for worry right now. My number one priority is to get you on that carriage. Prepared."

"Will he be okay?" Makoto couldn't help but wonder.

"I'm not sure, but like I said, I have no time to be concerned for him yet, so I must believe that he will manage. Although Nagisa may not be the brightest, I think we may be underestimating his abilities. At least, I hope so. I shall begin to look for him first thing in the morning, and I don't think he could have gotten far. He doesn't know the world outside of the town after all."

"Wait, you're not coming with me to Iwatobi?" Makoto asked, feeling panicked all of a sudden, "Am I supposed to go all by myself?!!"

"Of course not, another servant will accompany you."

"Then it will immediately come out that I'm pretending to be Nagisa!"

"We will explain the situation to him. He is a reliable man and I am positive he will help us."
"Alright, if you say so..." Makoto trailed off, not sounding very convinced. He understood that Rei needed to go look for Nagisa, but the fact that a third party would be involved with their conspiracy made him unsure.

When Rei saw the look on Makoto's face, he said, "Even if Nagisa hadn't been gone and would go to Iwatobi himself, I would not be the one to accompany him."

Makoto frowned and Rei laughed lightly, but Makoto could tell it was to cover up the ache inside of him.

"That would hurt far too much."

Although Rei had not sounded particularly sad when he said that, Makoto knew he was bleeding on the inside. He felt so sorry for both him and Nagisa, and he could completely understand why Nagisa had run away. He didn't know what he would have done in a situation like this. Even if he would like to think he would make the rational decision and do what was expected of him, he didn't love anyone like Nagisa loved Rei, so it would be unfair of him to judge like that.

"Before I left him yesterday evening," Rei started again, "he asked me to hold him. But I refused." He was quiet for a while as he tried to prevent his voice from cracking and his emotions from leaving him. "I knew that if I held him in my arms, I would never be able to let him go again."

"You did the right thing," Makoto assured and put a supportive hand on his shoulder. Rei looked back at him and nodded, but his eyes told Makoto that he regretted it.

After that it was silent as they made their way back to the palace. Once they got to the castle gates and Makoto saw the gatekeeper, panic began to rise in his being once more, but the gatekeeper was fast asleep. When Rei called for the gate to be opened and stated his name, the gatekeeper did as he requested and opened the gates without any trouble. Luckily he did not even notice that Makoto was present and Makoto guessed that the man just wanted to go back to sleep.

Inside the castle they made their way to Nagisa's chamber as quickly and quietly as possible. Running into someone would be bad, but fortunately they were able to make it without anyone noticing.

"Okay, so..." Makoto started once they were inside, "Now what?"

If he hadn't been so bewildered by the circumstances, he might have looked around the hallways and chambers of the enormous castle with amazement and wonder, but right now all he felt was distress.

"We need to make sure you're ready. First things first, your appearance. The rest will come later."

"Alright, but where are you going to get clothes? This is not exactly something a prince would wear and I'm quite sure I won't fit into Nagisa's suits," Makoto said as he gestured at his clothing.

"You most likely won't fit my clothes either..." Rei pondered before he got struck with an idea, "Of course! Wait here," he commanded as he left the room once more.

As Makoto waited for Rei to return, his nerves and panic began to consume him. There was no way he was going to successfully pull this off. He was no prince! Everyone would be able to see through him the moment they laid eyes upon him. Unlike Nagisa, he didn't look like a prince. He didn't act like a prince, hell, he even didn't know how princes acted. What did it take to be a prince?
Just as he was getting ready to blow the whole thing off and tell Rei he couldn't do it after all, the door opened.

A man with pink hair entered the room. That's it, Makoto thought, he hadn't even left the palace yet and they were already found out. However, before he had the chance to be scared, Rei came back and Makoto was able to breathe again.

"Makoto, this is Sir Kisumi," Rei introduced as he gestured at the man, "He will be the one to accompany you to Iwatobi."

"Hi!" Kisumi said as he walked towards Makoto and grabbed his hands, "It's nice to meet you, Makoto. Just call me 'Kisumi', 'kay?" His sentence was topped off with a wink.

The flamboyance and overall aura of Kisumi made it difficult for Makoto to believe he was just a servant, but with everything that had happened in the last hour, Makoto had learned to just accept it rather than question it. Before he had the chance to reply, Rei spoke again.

"There's not much time before the carriage leaves so we're going to have to do things quickly. Sir Kisumi, do you think Makoto will fit your clothing?"

Kisumi ran his eyes over Makoto's body before he nodded, "Yeah, I think so."

"Good. I presumed you already packed your suitcase, did you not?"

"I did."

"Can you select the finest garments you own and put them in Nagisa's suitcase for Makoto? Oh, and can you also get some towels, and a suit and a pair of boots of yours?"

"On it!" Kisumi left the room again.

"Come on," Rei said to Makoto as he walked into the room adjoined to Nagisa's chamber.

Wordlessly Makoto followed and they entered Nagisa's bathroom. Makoto marvelled at the size of it; it was bigger than his entire house. But he had no time to be surprised before Rei ordered him to strip.

"What?!" Makoto exclaimed as his cheeks glowed bright red.

"You can't go to Iwatobi looking like this so you have to bathe, and since we don't have any time to spare I'm going to assist you. Now, hurry up!"

To say that he was embarrassed would be an understatement, but Makoto did as he was told. In order to spare Makoto's modesty Rei made sure to keep his eyes above the belt. Because of that, he was able to study Makoto's torso. His shoulders were broad and his clavicle prominent, his arms and chest rather muscular, but his waist was narrow and his ribs were visible. Years of labour and hunger had truly sculpted his body.

There was no time for him to dwell on the state of Makoto's body, they had to make haste. He ran a bath and made Makoto wash his body as he washed his hair. Then when Makoto was in the tub, he brushed his nails to remove the dirt underneath them, then filed them.

When he got out of the tub Kisumi was standing ready with a towel for him. They helped Makoto get dressed and sat him down in front of a mirror to brush his hair. Rei was able to style his wet hair differently, but as it was drying up, it returned to its original, messy ways. No matter what Rei
did, he could not get it to work with him.

Makoto silently endured it all, his mind not entirely able to catch up with what was happening. It was all just a lot to take in for him and as Rei and Kisumi worked around him, his brain just kind of stopped.

Eventually Rei ceased his attempts of taming Makoto's wild locks and instead put Nagisa's crown on his head. Then he took one of the bottles that were standing on the dressing table and sprayed its contents on Makoto. A sweet, flower-like fragrance filled Makoto's nostrils, and though it smelled good, Makoto didn't exactly find the perfume fitting for himself. It was truly a fragrance for someone like Nagisa.

Once they were done they returned to Nagisa's bedroom and Makoto was able to look at himself in one of the mirrors. He barely even recognised himself in Kisumi's clothes and with Nagisa's crown on his head. He almost looked like a prince. Almost.

"It's not exactly a suit a prince would wear, but it will have to do," Rei commented.

"Hey! That's my best suit!" Kisumi protested, but there was no real malice in his voice.

"I am not saying it is not a good suit, it is just not very fitting for a prince."

"Yes, yes," Kisumi dismissed and he stepped closer to Makoto, "Don't listen to him. You look really good. Very handsome, if I do say so myself!"

"T-Thanks..."

"I'm sorry the clothes don't exactly fit though. They were tailored to fit me, after all."

"Ah, it's quite alright. Thank you for lending them to me," Makoto said. The suit was tight around his shoulders but loose around his midsection and the sleeves and pant legs were a tad too short. Still, it was far better than if he had to wear one of Nagisa's or even Rei's suits.

"That's what you get for being such a big guy," Kisumi laughed and gave him a friendly pat on the back.

"Now, for your manners," Rei started, "You need to fix your posture first." He took a step forward and stood behind Makoto. "Arch your back and push your chest forward. Try to keep your shoulders back."

Makoto arched his back but was not able to push his shoulders back, the tight cloth preventing him from doing so. "I can't, the suit's too tight. I'll rip the fabric."

"Forget it then." Rei stalked off as he mentally went through what else he needed to teach Makoto in the short amount of time they had. Realising that he would never be able to teach Makoto everything he needed to know nor would Makoto be able to remember it all, he concluded that he would have to resort to another means. "I've got a book on royal etiquette. I'll give it to you so you can read it on the carriage."

"Uh, Rei?"

"What?"

"Just one little problem with that," Makoto muttered, and when he saw Rei's despaired face, he was almost afraid to say it. "I can't read."
A deep sigh left Rei's lips as he brought his hand to his forehead. That's right, how could he have forgotten? Although he was doing his very best to keep a calm and collected demeanour, he was completely freaking out on the inside. His prince was missing and he was about to send a pauper he had met a mere week ago to another kingdom to pose as a prince. Even fools and madmen would claim him to be insane.

"Alright, we'll just go over the most basic and vital points then. Firstly, keep your posture like that. Try to maintain elegance in your gait. Carry yourself with pride and confidence, not arrogance."

Elegance, pride, confidence. Those were not words Makoto would have used to describe himself. He practically emitted clumsiness, cowardice and insecurity. But he would not object. He would be obedient, for obedience was an essential quality for a prince, was it not?

"Hold your head high. When you bow, keep your legs straight and stable, put your right hand over your heart and hold your left arm against your lower back."

"Like this?" Makoto asked as he bowed. The suit was constricting him a bit, but he didn't say anything about it.

"Perfect. During dinner, you will have multiple sets of cutlery, one for every course. You start with the ones on the outside and work your way inside. Chew with your mouth closed and don't speak with food in your mouth."

Multiple sets of cutlery? One for every course? Just how many courses were there?

"Speak politely and only when you are spoken to. If there is something that baffles or surprises you, try not to let it show. Pretend that it is customary and that you're used to it. If you see Prince Haruka do something you're not familiar with, mimick his behaviour but don't be too obvious about it," Rei uttered. He wanted to be sure Makoto would be completely ready for the upcoming days, but he did not know exactly in what type of situations he would be and what kind of manners he would need for them. There was nothing else he could immediately think of, so he would have to believe Makoto would get through them on his own. "You're a clever man, Makoto. Use your head."

"Alright," Makoto nodded.

Rei looked at his pocket watch. "It's time. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Sir Kisumi?"

"All ready!" Kisumi said and he shot Rei a thumbs up.

"Good. Let's go then."

They made their way through the palace and Kisumi and Rei were carrying their luggage. When Makoto had said that he could carry the suitcase himself, Kisumi had laughed as Rei reminded him that he was a prince now, and that tasks like these were for the servants. As they left the castle and Makoto saw the carriage, he began to worry once more.

"Wait, won't the coachman see that I'm not Nagisa?"

"Nagisa does not leave the palace much, for he does not attend a lot of formal occasions in other kingdoms. The chance that this particular coachman would be able to recognise him is very small,"
Rei assured.

At the carriage the coachman took their luggage and Rei began to say goodbye to Makoto and Kisumi.

"You should arrive in Iwatobi in the evening. Thank you, Makoto, and good luck. It won't be easy, but if there is anything you need to know you can always go to Sir Kisumi for advice. He will assist and support you through this experience. I will come to Iwatobi with Nagisa as soon as I have found him. Once again, thank you so much and my sincerest apologies for putting you through this."

"It's alright," Makoto said, "Thank you and good luck to you too. I hope you'll find him soon."

"I hope so too. Have a safe trip."

The coachman had returned and opened the door to the carriage.

"Thanks. Goodbye, Rei."

Kisumi and Makoto stepped inside the carriage. The coachman closed the door and climbed into the seat. For a second Rei looked Makoto in the eyes and said, "Remember who you are."

Then the coachman pulled the reins, the horses began to walk, and the carriage moved, leaving Rei behind as it was pulled off the palace grounds and through the gate.

A breath of relief left Makoto's mouth as soon as they had left the castle and town far behind. It made Kisumi laugh once again.

"Nervous?" he giggled, to which Makoto nodded, "See it as the first step in the adventure of your life!"

"A rather dangerous adventure..."

"True, true, but hey, what's life without a little risk and excitement?"

A great life, was what Makoto thought. But he knew Kisumi was just trying to comfort him and though it was not exactly working, he appreciated it all the same.

"Say, those boots," Kisumi said as he gestured to Makoto's feet, "they're too small, aren't they?"

"Just a little, but it's alright," Makoto admitted although he had hoped Kisumi wouldn't notice, "I'm used to it anyway."

"You're used to wearing boots that are too small?" Kisumi asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I am." It was true. Back when he got a sudden growth spurt, his boots were suddenly a few sizes too small. Knowing that his parents wouldn't be able to afford a new pair, he had kept his mouth shut and wore them until they were falling apart. When his mother found out she had scolded him for it, but he knew he had no other choice. He would gladly have painful feet if it meant that his siblings were well-fed and pain-free.

"When we get to Iwatobi, I'll go out to get you a new pair."

"Oh, you don't have to, it's alright, really!"

"Nonsense. They'll damage your feet, and a prince should only wear the finest," Kisumi ended with
an impersonation of Rei.

Despite how tense he was, Makoto couldn't help but chuckle a little.

They continued to chatter like that. Makoto was afraid he would be spending the entire trip worrying and feeling uneasy, but Kisumi did his best to distract him from what awaited them at the end of their journey. When he had asked if Kisumi had any advice for him, Kisumi had shaken his head; rather than teaching him how to behave, his act would be much more convincing if his mannerisms were natural rather than taught and as long as he kept in mind what Rei already told him, everything would be fine.

Although he had been sceptical and anxious at first of the fact that Rei wouldn't come with him and instead he would be escorted by someone he didn't know, he was now kind of glad that Kisumi was with him rather than Rei. It was not that he didn't like Rei, because he did, but Rei would only make him more nervous and concerned. Kisumi was more relaxed, easygoing and laid-back, and right now, that was exactly what Makoto needed to feel reassured and at ease.

Eventually their banter died out as fatigue started to take over. They had been awake for the majority of the night and the hustle and bustle that was occurring during the time they should have been asleep was starting to take its toll. The bumps in the road effectively lulled them to sleep.

When they arrived at the palace of Iwatobi at dusk, there were servants already waiting for them. The sight truly reminded Makoto of the reason he was here and a lump of trepidation was forming in his throat. Kisumi put a reassuring hand on Makoto's shoulder.

"You'll be fine," he whispered. These were the last words of comfort he was able to offer Makoto, and Makoto knew it. The moment he would step out of the carriage he was no longer Makoto Tachibana, but Prince Nagisa Hazuki. Rei's words resonated through his head. 'Remember who you are.'

The door of the carriage was opened and when they went outside they were formally welcomed by the staff of the palace. Their suitcases were removed from the carriage and they were led inside. One of the servants explained that they would be taken to their chambers first so they could freshen themselves up before meeting the King, Queen, and most importantly, Prince Haruka.

As they walked through the large hallways and staircases of the palace, Makoto tried to contain his amazement and silently followed behind the servant. Suddenly the servant stopped in front of a large door.

"This is the room reserved for you, Your Highness," she said as she opened the door and guided him inside.

"This is my room?" Makoto asked in astonishment. The room was bigger than he had expected and the bed was enormous. There were doors leading to a large balcony and he could see another door that most likely led to an adjoined bathroom.

"Is it not to your liking, Your Highness?"

"It is!" Makoto quickly reassured before he remembered his role and cleared his throat. "Thank you."
The servant left the room shortly after that, leaving him all by himself. As soon as the door was closed Makoto sighed and walked over to the doors of the balcony, opening them and going outside. The cool evening breeze blew through his hair for as much as that was possible as he leaned on the railing, looking out at the setting sun and deeply breathing in and out a couple of times to calm himself.

He could do this. For a couple of days, he would be Prince Nagisa. Whatever happened after that did not matter. He could do this.

Repeating this in his head, he went back inside to wash his face. The size of the bathroom baffled him again, although it was not as large as Nagisa's, it was still larger than his house. Afterwards he sat down on the bed and looked around the chamber, his head full of thoughts.

What would Prince Haruka be like? Would he be kind and bubbly like Nagisa, or would he be cold and gruff? Would he be tall or short? Slender or chubby? Would he have light or dark hair? And what colour would his eyes be?

Makoto thought about all of this but he could not form a good image in his head. He practically knew nothing about Prince Haruka, and that made him curious. While he could completely understand why Nagisa didn't want to meet let alone marry a stranger like Prince Haruka, Makoto couldn't help but feel a little excited. Excited to unravel the mystery that was Prince Haruka Nanase.

A few soft knocks on the door pulled him out of his reverie.

"Ah, come in!" he called and Kisumi opened the door.

"Are you ready, Your Highness?"

"I am," Makoto replied and he got up. It was not entirely true but the longer he waited, the more time his nerves had to grow. He took another deep breath to gather himself before he followed Kisumi and the other servants towards the throne room.

They entered the room where the King, Queen and Prince were already waiting for them. When they got closer and Makoto laid his eyes upon Prince Haruka, every coherent thought immediately vanished from his head.

Prince Haruka was shorter than himself, but a good amount taller than Nagisa. He was slender, his skin was fair, and the hair beneath his crown was dark black. His facial features were soft, his cheeks porcelain, his nose thin and upturned, and his small mouth was open ever so slightly. He was absolutely beautiful. Truly a prince.

But Makoto's heart stopped entirely when his gaze met the bluest, most breathtaking eyes he had ever seen. The eye-contact remained because Makoto was simply unable to look away; he was drowning in the beauty that was Prince Haruka Nanase. Little did he know, at the other end of the gaze, Prince Haruka was experiencing the same wonder.

Around him people were talking, but he didn't hear any of it. A servant introduced the King, Queen, and Prince Haruka, but it all went past him. Like the rest of the world no longer existed from the second he had met Prince Haruka's eyes.

Then Prince Haruka suddenly averted his eyes, a small blush dusting his cheeks as he tried to hide himself behind his fringe and Makoto was taken back to earth.

"Your Highness, Your Majesty, may I present you," Kisumi formally presented as he gestured at
Prince Haruka bowed and murmured, "It is an honour to meet you."

The sound of his deep and velvety voice made Makoto hold his breath. Like the rest of him, it was absolutely beautiful. He simply had no other words to describe him. Never in his life had he ever seen someone quite like him, so elegant, so gorgeous, so pure.

"The honour is mine," Makoto returned, accompanied with a bow of his own. He had to try his best to keep his voice steady and even, for Prince Haruka's presence made him truly and utterly speechless.

"There is still some time before dinner," announced the servant, "We shall leave Prince Haruka and Prince Nagisa alone so they can get acquainted."

"Would you like to accompany me for a walk through the gardens?" Prince Haruka asked Makoto with almost rehearsed politeness as he held out his hand.

"It would be an honour," Makoto replied with a nod and he accepted the prince's hand. His hand was soft and delicate, smaller than his own, and it fit perfectly inside his. Like they were made to hold each other.

Prince Haruka led him through a different hall towards the gardens. Once they were outside and the doors were closed, Prince Haruka let go of his hand and Makoto immediately missed his touch. The prince turned his face away as his body shook.

Concerned, Makoto was about to ask what was wrong when he realised the prince was laughing. His stoic demeanour dissolved into thin air as he softly chuckled. The reason for his amusement was unbeknown to Makoto, all he knew was that his laughter was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard.

"Excuse me," Prince Haruka uttered, biting his lip to prevent himself from smiling, "It is just that you are not exactly who we were expecting you to be."

All of the warm feelings Makoto had from meeting Prince Haruka turned into ice. It hadn't even been five minutes since they met and it was already out that he wasn't Nagisa. Well, how couldn't he have been found out. Next to someone like Prince Haruka who basically emitted royalty, Makoto stuck out like a sore thumb. It was obvious he was an imposter.

"It's just," Prince Haruka attempted to explain, "All this time I was told I was to marry Princess Nagisa."

For the umpteenth time within twenty-four hours, relief washed over Makoto.

"Did you see the look on my parents' faces when the ambassador announced you were Prince Nagisa?" he continued, his voice full of amusement. "From your name they had assumed your sex; they most likely confused you with one of your sisters and made the arrangement without much thought. They are too pridelful to outright admit their misconception, especially because they gave me a rather feminine name as well, so I wonder what they will do next, for the reason they made the arrangement was to ensure the bloodline would be continued."

The tension completely left his body at this explanation. It was alright. There was simply a misconception on his family's part. Everything was still alright.

"Forgive me for not meeting your expectations, Prince Haruka," Makoto chuckled, "Do you
"Not at all," Prince Haruka said earnestly, and something told Makoto that he was actually quite pleased with this outcome. Then he cleared his throat and tried to regain his cool attitude, "And please, call me Haru."

"Then you can call me Ma- Nagisa," Makoto corrected, hoping that Haruka had not noticed his slip up.

If he had, then he didn't mention it as he simply asked him to walk through the garden with him, and Makoto couldn't do anything but accept his offer. They descended the stairs so they were at the ground floor to begin their walk.

As they were strolling through the garden, Makoto looked around himself and inwardly he marvelled at how big it was.

"What a beautiful garden," he commented not out of politeness, but with genuine awe, "I'm sure Ran and Ren would love to play here."

"Ran and Ren?" Haruka asked and Makoto could slap himself. He didn't, because that would be weird and suspicious, so instead he said,

"They're my... cats."

"You have cats?"

Even though Haruka's exterior made it look like it was simply a wonder, there was some kind of excitement in the question. As if he was thrilled to find they had a common interest.

"I do, they're my favourite animals. They're just so cute!" If petting the stray cats around town counted as owning cats, then Makoto was not lying. "Do you like cats?"

"I do," Haruka nodded, "but unfortunately, my parents are not so fond of them. Or any other animal for that matter. Therefore I was never allowed to own a pet."

"I'm sorry to hear that." It wasn't like Makoto didn't understand, for he truthfully had never had a pet either. His family barely earned enough to feed five mouths, let alone six or more. But if he truly were a prince, then he would have loved to have a couple of cats. "But when you become king, you can get as many pets as you want."

"That's true," Haruka nodded with a small smile.

Their conversation continued like this, pleasantly light and less formal than Makoto had expected. It surprised him how easy it was to talk to Haruka. Although they came from two completely different worlds, they somehow clicked so well. It was as if he had known him for far longer than a mere hour, as if they had been friends for years already. Even more so than it had felt with Nagisa. Somehow, being with Haruka just felt so familiar. It felt right.

Unfortunately, all good things have to come to an end and after about an hour, a maid came to tell them dinner was being served and that they had been requested to return. With only a bit of reluctance, Haruka and Makoto left the gardens to rejoin the King and Queen for dinner.

The thing was that having a meal with others present was one of the aspects of this whole act that scared Makoto most. Table manners for royalty were far different than those for common folk, and though Rei had given him pointers, he was not very confident. Next to that he was afraid of the
conversation that would take place during dinner. What if the King and Queen would ask him all kinds of questions he would not know the answers to? Or what if they would discuss affairs he had no knowledge of? That would surely crush his façade immediately.

Luckily for him, dinner progressed without much difficulty: he remembered Rei’s advice about the silverware and mimicked Haruka’s behaviour for the most part, and not many words were uttered during the meal - which in its turn was odd for Makoto, because he was used to pleasant conversation filling up whatever meager meal was served as supper, but he supposed things worked differently in royal families.

The only real problem he had stumbled upon was something he would never in his entire life thought he would ever find to be a problem: there was too much food. All the food he was served was more than what his entire family usually got in three days. Since he was used to getting the bare minimum, by the time the main course was served, he was already full and he deeply wished he could have shared it with his parents and siblings.

He didn’t want to be rude nor waste a good meal so he tried to eat as much of it as he could, but he reminded himself that nothing would be more impolite to the chef and his hosts than barfing the food out all over the table, so he ceased after he was bloated. This did raise the question if he did not enjoy the food, but he assured them that he did, and that he was just full already. No disrespect to his mother, but it was truly the best food he had ever tasted, prepared with the freshest and best ingredients there were. It did comfort him to see that Haruka did not finish everything either, so it was not like he was just the odd one out. It meant there was truly too much food.

The knowledge that all the leftovers would most likely be thrown out hurt him immensely, because he knew better than anyone else what it meant to be hungry. So to see so much food being prepared only for it to be wasted made him very upset, for there were people outside of the castle’s walls starving to death. People like him.

Obviously he did not mention this and kept all of his emotions inside. It would be weird to say something about it, because things like that probably happened at Nagisa’s home too.

After dinner he was dismissed, with the king and queen telling him that he was probably exhausted from his journey and would appreciate the rest. He thanked them, both for their hospitality and the meal. He wasn’t really sure if he was supposed to, but it seemed like the right thing to do. Politeness was never a bad quality to have, he thought.

Back in his chamber Kisumi helped to get him ready for bed, and he subtly praised him for his behaviour. So far, no one had seemed to notice that he wasn’t Nagisa. Just a couple of more days. They could get through this.

When he was lying in his bed, staring at the ceiling, the reality of where he was began to sink in as the hecticness of the past twenty-four hours began to wear off. Like the king and queen had suggested, he was exhausted and although his bed was comfortable and warm and for once his belly was completely full, he missed his home. Unlike this large chamber, his home was small but cosy, filled with the love of his family. Being all alone in his bed without the feeling of Ren and Ran pressing against him was odd, and though he liked how much room he had to move around without strain, he still missed the familiar pressure. He had never been away from home for so long and he wondered how they were doing, if they were worried about him and if they missed him too.

Not allowing himself to be swallowed by loneliness, Makoto willed those thoughts away and instead tried to focus on the job at hand. He thought about Nagisa, wondering if he was okay and if Rei had found him yet. Although he dearly hoped that Rei would find him soon, something inside
of him was reluctant and he realised that he wouldn't mind to spend a few more days here. But it wasn't the comfortable bed that made him feel this way, nor was it the delicious food. It was Haruka.

He was actually really looking forward to seeing Haruka again tomorrow. There was just something about him that drew Makoto to him. Besides his obvious good-looks and his kind personality, there was something about him that made Makoto feel warm, that made him feel something he had never felt before. A tiny voice in the back of his head warned him for these feelings, but he ignored it. Deep down he knew he should stop this clear attraction that was beginning to take form inside of him and instead focus on fulfilling his job as best as he could, but he didn't want to. Because somehow, he felt as if this attraction might be mutual. So for now, he would allow himself to enjoy every moment he could spend with Haruka. He would worry about the consequences later. This time he had with Haruka was truly a once in a lifetime experience, and he would enjoy it to its fullest.

He drifted off to sleep with his head filled with thoughts of his prince.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and for all the attention this fic has received so far. If you enjoyed it, then I hope you'll continue to enjoy it in the future and that you'll like the upcoming chapters as well!

If you have anything you would like to say or ask then you can either leave a comment or you can contact me on Tumblr and/or Twitter @DatHeetJoella

Once again, thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed and I hope to meet you at the next chapter again!

I hope you have a wonderful day! ^^
Sink or Swim

Chapter Summary

As Haruka and Makoto got to know each other, Makoto struggled to keep his identity hidden, but that wasn't the only factor that was making this job harder than he anticipated.

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday, Nagisa! Unfortunately, you're not really in this chapter but your memory is alive.

There are a couple of things I want to mention at the start of this chapter:

First off, from this point on we're heavily going to diverge from the plot of the movie in favour of my own agenda and the things that I wanted to happen in this universe. So for those of you who've seen the movie, there may be some tiny things that are still the same but don't expect the exact same turn of events. After all, this fic is only loosely based off the movie.

Second, I'm currently working on chapter 5 of this fic and I will post chapter 4 once that one's done. I hope I can keep a regular updating schedule of around the start of a new month, but I can't promise anything. This may seem like a slow schedule, but it's the best I can do and since this fic doesn't have that many chapters, it shouldn't be too long before the entire thing is up.

Third, in my head, I envisioned this chapter and the next as one. As soon as I was writing this chapter, I realised that that would be impossible. This chapter on its own is already 16k, which is longer than the previous two combined, and if I stuck to my previous planning, it would be a 35k chapter, which is a little much so I know I made the right choice to split it up. Therefore I hope this chapter will feel like it's enough to stand on its own, but I think it will.

Lastly, I kind of forgot to mention this in the previous chapters, but the ages of the characters are a little different than in the series: Rei is a little older than Nagisa and Makoto (contrasting to the anime where Makoto and Nagisa are actually older than Rei), and Kisumi is also older than the other characters, he's like in his mid-twenties. Though this doesn't necessarily change anything in this fic, I wanted to mention it since it makes more sense this way. I hope you understand.

Also, a brief reminder that this fic is set in a fantasy universe rather than a historical one. Electricity and plumbing are here, advanced technology's not.

I could be forgetting to mention something here, but I think that's it. I've rambled enough anyway.

So, I hope you enjoy!
The next morning Makoto was awoken by a soft knock on the door that startled him awake. When he opened his eyes and looked around himself, he was met with a high marble ceiling and for a second he panicked and sat up because he wasn't lying in his bed and didn't know where he was, but then the memories of the past two days shot through his mind and he remembered, breathing out a sigh of relief.

Then the knocking continued, a bit more insistent this time and Makoto tried to speak up but his voice was still groggy with sleep. He cleared his throat before he tried again.

"Come in."

The door slowly opened and the same servant that had shown him his room yesterday came in with a silver tray in her hands. "Good morning, Your Highness," she spoke with a nod of her head, "I brought you your breakfast."

"In bed?" Makoto questioned in bewilderment. He had wanted to return her greeting first but he was so astonished that he forgot.

"Is that not customary for you?" she asked, worried if she had somehow offended him.

"It is, it is!" Makoto hastily said before he remembered that as a prince, he should be calm and collected. "I was just expecting to have breakfast with Prince Haruka and the king and queen."

The woman shook her head. "The king and queen have left the palace to attend to business and won't return until next week." She put the tray down over Makoto's lap. "Prince Haruka has requested your presence at ten o'clock sharp. He will be waiting for you in front of the gardens."

"Alright. Thank you," Makoto muttered with a soft smile and the servant blushed before she bowed and quickly took her leave.

Makoto didn't think much of it and turned to the tray in his lap. Truthfully he was not used to eating in bed at all; the only times he could ever remember eating breakfast in bed was when he was sick as a child and his mother would feed him broth - that sometimes consisted of nothing more than hot water and some old bread. Breakfast and dinner were practically the only times his family got to spend time together and converse and he always treasured that. Regardless of what his mother served, he enjoyed being together with his family and he especially looked forward to hearing about his siblings’ day and watching them eat. It always reminded him what he was working so hard for and to see his hard work paid off by the joyous smiles of Ran and Ren always gave him strength.

Once again he was hit with a pang of homesickness and he just wished that they weren't too worried about him. His parents, though grateful, had already been suspicious after he had come home with higher earnings than he had in a long time, but he had been able to ease their concerns with parts of the truth. He could only imagine how they must feel now after he had abruptly left in the middle of the night with nothing but a vague note that he hadn't even written himself, for they knew he couldn't. Not wanting to get lost in how much he missed his family, he shook his head and...
turned back to the tray in his lap.

Because it was so normal for him to have breakfast with his family, he had expected that it was like that for other families too but apparently the customs were different in royal families. Now he just hoped that the servant hadn't interpreted his words the wrong way and that she assumed that he was expecting that they would have breakfast together so he could get to know his future husband and family-in-law better.

It wasn't like it would help him to worry about that now, so he decided to just start with his breakfast already. He didn't know exactly what time it was but he didn't want to be late, especially since Haruka would be waiting for him.

He lifted the lids off the plates and he saw freshly baked bread, fried eggs and all other types of food that he couldn't even begin to recognise. Everything smelled absolutely delicious and even though he had been stuffed to the brim before he went to sleep, his stomach started to rumble just from the sight and scent of all the food.

Eagerly he dug in and he moaned softly for it tasted like absolute heaven. It was just as good as dinner had been yesterday but he had restrained himself back then and suppressed every urge to make a noise, for he didn't want to behave oddly or do something they would consider to be weird. But now he was alone he allowed himself to revel in it and enjoy all the food to the fullest. The only thing he missed was the chatter and presence of his family and once more he dearly wished that he could have shared this food with them. It only made him determined to work even harder from now on so that one day, they would feel satiated too after eating a meal that was as delicious as this one.

At this point he was basically just stuffing his face with it, trying not to feel guilty for eating so much food all by himself but he had to admit that it was definitely much more pleasant than to be malnourished. And if he had been with others he would have gladly shared everything, but he wasn't now so he forgave himself for his gluttonous behaviour.

Just as he had taken another large bite there was knocking on his door again. Remembering what Rei told him about speaking with his mouth full, he quickly tried to swallow but the food got stuck in his throat. He reached out for the cup of tea that was on his tray and took a big gulp in the hopes of washing it down, but the scorching liquid only burned his tongue and made him cough violently. It was almost funny how obvious it was that he wasn't used to this. All of this luxury and class was too much all of a sudden for a simple boy like himself.

When he finally caught his breath he called, "Come in," and was relieved to see that it was Kisumi who was standing at his door.

"Are you alright in here?" Kisumi asked with a chuckle as he walked in, holding a large box in his arms and kicking the door shut behind him.

Makoto's face darkened with embarrassment and he coughed again before he nodded. "The food just got stuck in my throat."

Kisumi laughed again. "Slow down a little and don't eat too much all of a sudden," he advised good-naturedly, "You don't want to get a stomachache."

"Right," Makoto mumbled. He hadn't actually thought about that; it had never been a concern before and that was why he didn't think there would be any consequences to his gluttony.

In the meanwhile Kisumi had put the box down on top of the desk and he pulled back the chair and
sat down on it backwards, leaning onto it as he looked at Makoto.

Suddenly Makoto remembered his manners. "Sorry, do you want some?" he offered, gesturing towards the plates.

"No, thanks," Kisumi declined with a soft chuckle, "I've already had breakfast along with some other servants."

"Oh, okay," Makoto nodded, "Do you mind if I…?"

"Of course not." Kisumi waved dismissively with his hand, "Take your time, Your Highness."

At that Makoto chuckled lightly as well and he took another bite. "Do you happen to know what time it is?"

"Certainly," Kisumi said and he took his watch out of his pocket, "It's a little past nine, so you have more than enough time left to eat in peace before you need to get ready."

"I see," Makoto muttered and he smiled softly once more, "Thanks."

A smirk appeared on Kisumi's face and he leaned his chin onto his arms, looking slyly at Makoto. "Are you excited?" he asked, although the smug tone in his voice told Makoto that he already knew the answer to that question.

Makoto's cheeks grew a bit warmer. It was no use denying it and Kisumi didn't seem like he would scold him for feeling this way; on the contrary, he almost seemed to encourage it. "Kind of, yeah."

"You're not the only one who's excited," he sang, implying that he knew more than Makoto expected him to.

"What do you mean?"

"While I was eating breakfast with some other servants, Prince Haruka showed up. He asked one of the maids if she wanted to tell you to meet him in the gardens at ten. He seemed a little bashful or even shy, maybe. It was cute, honestly."

The thought of Haruka being excited to see him too made his belly tingle with fuzzy feelings and if he was looking forward to their meeting before, then he really couldn't wait now. The mental image of Haruka shyly requesting his presence was so endearing that Makoto almost regretted that he hadn't been there to see it. To witness that beautiful face turning pink in the cheeks just like it had yesterday because of him. His heart started to beat a little faster all of a sudden and he could feel his own cheeks colouring even further as he thought of that adorable sight.

His emotions had to be shining through his expression for Kisumi laughed for the umpteenth time that morning. "So if you finish up your breakfast, then I'll help you get ready. After all, you want to look your best for Prince Haruka, don't you?" he teased and he tipped it off with a wink. Before Makoto even had the chance to sputter a reply, Kisumi continued, "That's right, I almost forgot! I got you new boots."

He turned back to the box he put on the desk before and he took one boot out of it, holding it up to let Makoto see. It was a large black boot, seemingly made out of fine leather.

"It looks nice," Makoto commented, "and expensive. Were they?"

"That's none of your concern," Kisumi said as he shook his head with a small smile, "If you just
worry about Prince Haruka, then I will worry about everything else."

"I… Alright, thank you," Makoto replied and he returned Kisumi’s smile, deciding not to argue it.

"You're turning more and more into a prince with every passing second," Kisumi remarked and though it was intended to sound like a joke, Makoto could hear that he actually meant it and that made him feel a bit more at ease.

Once he was done eating breakfast Kisumi helped him to get ready for the day. After freshening himself up in the bathroom, Kisumi assisted him into another one of his suits that was too tight around his shoulders, though it was a little more 'casual' than the one he had been wearing yesterday, or so Kisumi claimed - in actuality, it still seemed incredibly formal but he had learned not to question it.

When he had asked about the crown, Kisumi informed him that he only had to wear it on formal occasions such as yesterday and that he shouldn't wear it today for Prince Haruka would not be wearing his, either. This made Makoto feel a little insecure, because the crown was basically the only thing that made him look like a prince and without it, he looked like nothing more than a servant at best and therefore he was afraid that Haruka would see right through his façade. Kisumi assured him that that would not be the case. Although his clothing may not be as fancy as Prince Haruka's would be, there was no reason for him to be suspicious or wary about it for he had no reason to believe that Makoto wasn't actually Prince Nagisa. If anything, he would take it as a form of modesty and Prince Haruka didn't seem to be the type to care too much about the garbs of others. Especially not when the person inside the garb was as handsome as Makoto, Kisumi concluded with another wink; Makoto soon found out that that was his thing and while someone else might have made him feel uncomfortable with those kind of gestures and comments that were almost flirtatious, he knew Kisumi didn't mean it like that and was just trying to make him feel less tense and more at ease, and Makoto appreciated that.

The boots that Kisumi brought him fit and even though they were new, they were already much more comfortable than Kisumi's had been for they were the right size and most likely also because they were made out of the finest materials. When he asked him how he was able to get them so quickly, Kisumi had simply said that he had a few tricks up his sleeve - in reality he had gone out to get them yesterday while Makoto was with the royal family, being lucky enough to get there right before the store closed, but Kisumi enjoyed being mysterious and cryptic so he hadn't told Makoto that and Makoto hadn't cared enough to pry any further, his mind engulfed with thoughts about Haruka.

"Are you ready to go meet your prince, Your Highness?" Kisumi asked with a grin when Makoto was fully clothed.

The nerves that had been coiling in his stomach yesterday returned, although they were not just from anxiety, but from excitement as well. They still had a few minutes to spare before it would be ten o'clock but Makoto didn't want to leave Haruka waiting, so he took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes."

Kisumi opened the door and gestured to it with his arm. "After you."

For moral support, Kisumi accompanied Makoto through the halls of the castle. Makoto was pretty glad about that, since he didn't want to accidentally get lost inside the large palace because his mind was drifting off and Kisumi's presence prevented that from happening.

When they got to the doors of the platform that led down to the gardens Makoto saw Haruka's back through the glass; he was already standing by the railing and waiting for him and his heart skipped
a beat.

"Have fun," Kisumi whispered with a pat on his back before he turned around as if to take his leave.

Makoto took another breath to calm himself before he opened the doors. At the sound of the doors opening Haruka turned around and once again every cohesive thought dissipated as he stared into the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen.

"Good morning."

With just that soft murmur in that alluring voice all of Makoto's nerves vanished. Somehow, when he was in Haruka's company he felt comfortable and safe, like everything would be alright no matter what happened as long as he was near. It was odd, an odd sense of belonging that he couldn't help but feel despite having just met him.

When he realised that he hadn't responded, he quickly stuttered, "G-Good morning, Haru."

"Has everything been to your liking?" Haruka asked and Makoto could tell that he was not simply asking that out of politeness, but out of genuine concern and his heart leapt inside his chest. "Your room, the food…?"

"Yes, everything is perfect," Makoto assured. It was honestly more than he could ever dream of having and he had never expected to experience something like this, so he was more than satisfied with everything that had been prepared for him; well, for Nagisa actually, but still.

"I'm glad. If there is ever something that is not, then please let me know so I can make some arrangements."

A fond smile stretched his lips. "Thank you, Haru. Did you sleep well last night?"

Haruka's thin eyebrows were raised in what seemed to be surprise, almost as if he was startled by Makoto asking him such a question, but then he averted his eyes and a tiny smile appeared on his face as well. "I did, thank you. Did you?"

"Yes." Makoto nodded and then his eyes fell on the stone railing Haruka was standing in front of and he saw two baskets standing on top of it. Just as he was about to ask about them, Haruka spoke again.

"Shall we go?" he proposed and he grabbed the handles of the baskets, pulling them off the railing.

Seeing Haruka carry the baskets himself was a bit odd to Makoto; when he had tried to carry his own suitcase Rei had told him that princes weren't supposed to carry their own belongings, but the servants did for them. He looked around himself but he saw no maid or lackey nearby.

"Where are all the servants?" He honestly hadn't intended for that to sound like he was so spoilt that he needed servants to do everything for him, but he was seriously wondering for they had been all around the palace yesterday yet he hadn't run into anyone today besides the maid that served him his breakfast.

Luckily Harka seemed to recognise the integrity in his voice and he said, "I dismissed them all for today. My parents are gone so I figured I'd give them a day off." So we could be alone without anyone disturbing us. Haruka hadn't verbalised those words, but somehow, Makoto could read them in his eyes and his heart made another jump, fluttering inside his chest. If there was something that Haruka had already given him, it was cardiac problems.
Still, he couldn't help but smile and the caring side of him just had to reach out to the baskets. "Please, allow me."

"It's alright, I've got it," Haruka declined but Makoto wasn't having any of it.

"I insist," he said, remembering how Nagisa had told him the same in a way that he was just unable to go against and he therefore hoped that these words would have the same effect on Haruka. After all, Haruka was the real prince here and Makoto was used to carrying stuff that was much heavier so two baskets were absolutely no trouble for him.

Unfortunately, Haruka was quite the stubborn one as well and he looked up at Makoto, almost as if he were challenging him but then he simply snorted. "We'll make a compromise, then. Here," he said and he handed one of the baskets to Makoto and held onto the other one himself.

Knowing that this was the best he was going to get, Makoto chuckled lightly before he took the basket. "Alright."

They walked over to the stairs and without thinking Makoto reached out his hand to Haruka. Although he surely didn't need any assistance walking down the steps, it had been an unconscious excuse to hold on to his delicate hand once more. Makoto seemingly wasn't the only one who desired this, for Haruka accepted his hand, his slim fingers curling around Makoto's larger ones.

When they got to the bottom of the stairs they released each other's hand and Makoto missed his touch once more. It was odd that he already longed for Haruka's touch after the short amount of time they spent together but he couldn't help it; it almost felt as if his hand was incomplete without Haruka's in it. He didn't want to make things awkward nor overstep Haruka's boundaries, and therefore he didn't reach out to him again. Not without a valid reason, anyway.

They strolled into the garden and Makoto felt a little strange, like he was being watched. He glanced around himself but couldn't see anyone, until he looked back over his shoulder up to the doors he had just gone through and saw a flash of pink before it disappeared again and it was enough for Makoto to know what, or rather who, it had been. Inwardly he rolled his eyes and shook his head at the spectator. And apparently he was not the only one who had noticed him.

"Your servant," Haruka started in a tone that Makoto hadn't heard from him before, "Sir Shigino, was it not?" When Makoto nodded he continued, "Has he worked for your family for long?"

"Yes," Makoto confirmed, remembering that Kisumi had told him this on the carriage, "His family has served the royal family for generations and he grew up inside the castle."

When Haruka's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, Makoto realised his slip-up and he really hoped that Haruka wouldn't seek anything behind it. He was lucky, for that didn't seem to be the part that Haruka had been interested in.

"Are you two close?"

This inquiry almost sounded like it was laced with jealousy and even if Makoto couldn't really believe that that was the actual emotion behind his questions, it still made him feel a little warm inside.

"No, not particularly."

"I see," Haruka mumbled and Makoto caught the tiny grin that was forming on his lips just before he turned his head away to focus on the path before them. Good.
Since Haruka had asked him such a question seemingly out of nowhere, he supposed it wasn't that weird if he asked Haruka a question too, for he was genuinely wondering. "You mentioned your parents left the palace, right? Are they away on business?" It was sort of like he was fishing for an answer that he already knew, but he just found it odd that they went out on business the day after Nagisa should have arrived for their arrangement. To him it seemed like one would plan no such trips after just having met your son's future partner for the first time and he was staying over at your home.

"Sort of. I wasn't informed what for but since it was rather impromptu, my best guess is that they're trying to find a maiden to break off the arrangement between our kingdoms."

At that Makoto softly gasped. Even if it would be really convenient for Nagisa if that were to happen, the thought of Haruka being arranged to marry someone else was like a punch right in his gut. Although he was not the one Haruka would eventually marry, for now he could at least pretend that he was and even then, the arrangement between him and Nagisa didn't feel the same because he knew Nagisa's heart belonged to Rei.

"Are you okay with that?" he couldn't help but ask, the concern he had unintentionally bleeding through his voice.

Haruka looked at him and smirked. "They're not going to find anyone. They were already informed by all the neighbouring kingdoms that there were no princesses or ladies left to be married off; there weren't that many girls born in our generation, save for your sisters perhaps. So when they heard that Nagisa Hazuki from the kingdom of Sano was still unwed, they made the arrangement as quickly as they could."

"Oh," Makoto mumbled and even if it really wouldn't be him who got to marry Haruka in the end, he felt relieved nonetheless.

"And if, by any chance, they do find someone, then I'll just express my preference for this arrangement," Haruka said, "It helps, you know, being the only child in a royal family and therefore the crown prince."

Makoto chuckled softly at that joking remark, his belly starting to tingle with butterflies at Haruka's words. Though the little voice inside his head remained telling him that there was no way this was going to happen, he tuned it out for as much as he could. He enjoyed being with Haruka and he wanted to make the fullest of it while he still could.

"So, where are we going?" he asked then. Up until now he had just blindly followed Haruka and had forgotten about the baskets they were carrying, but now that he was reminded of it, he wondered if Haruka had planned a picnic. It would be a little odd since they had had breakfast not too long ago and Makoto wasn't sure if his stomach already had room for lunch.

"I want to show you one of my favourite spots," Haruka began, "There's this lake a little outside the castle walls that I spend most of my spare time at - which is not much, but I rather enjoy being there. I thought we could go swimming together."

At those words, Makoto felt a bit alarmed. "Ah, I um, I've never swum before," he confessed. "We don't exactly have a lake right outside the castle walls." He wasn't sure if that was true or not, but it was the only valid reasoning he could instantly come up with.

"Oh," Haruka uttered this time, "I can teach you, if you want. Or we could do something else if you'd prefer that."
"Oh no, I'd love to go swimming with you. If you want to teach me, that is." His enthusiasm was clear in his voice and normally he would have felt ashamed because of it, but when Haruka looked at him with a glimmer of excitement sparkling in his beautiful eyes, the embarrassment evaporated before he could even feel it.

"Great," Haruka said and there was not a hint of sarcasm in his voice; like he was genuinely thrilled to share his beloved activity with him.

"Did you bring any costumes for swimming?"

"No."

"Oh," Makoto repeated, "But then how are we going to…?"

Haruka looked over at him, his face blank and his tone serious as he said, "Why, in the nude of course."

Immediately Makoto's face heated up at the thought of being naked in front of Haruka and worse, of seeing Haruka naked. His ethereal presence was already overwhelming Makoto as it was and if he were to see him in his purest form then he would most likely blush himself to death. Although everything felt really familiar and natural with Haruka, he was not quite ready for something like this yet.

"I- uh, I'm not sure if I, I mean…"

When Haruka saw Makoto's widened eyes and red cheeks and heard his stammering reply, he couldn't help but laugh lightly. "I was joking," Haruka said as he lifted his free hand to his mouth to cover up his smile.

"Haru!" Makoto whined but he couldn't even be mad or annoyed for Haruka's laughter was just so breathtakingly stunning that he couldn't do anything but smile as well.

"I thought we could just swim in our undergarments. It's warm today so they'll dry soon and I did bring us some towels, so if that's alright with you…"

"Yes, that's fine," Makoto affirmed with a small chuckle. Even if being in front of Haruka in nothing but his undergarments was still rather embarrassing and awkward to Makoto, it was far better than being completely naked and he did want Haruka to share his joy with him, so that was alright. "So, do you have any other hobbies besides swimming in the nude?"

Though the question was asked in a teasing manner, Haruka understood that it had been asked out of genuine interest. "I do. I like to paint, much to my parents' dismay."

"Really?" Makoto asked, "How so?"

"They think that princes are to be painted, not to paint themselves," Haruka explained with a shrug, "They were against it at first but they allow it now, even if they'd rather have me focus on other things. Fortunately, I've never really cared that much for their opinion either way."

"Well, I think it's amazing," Makoto thought earnestly. He didn't think that there was anything wrong with Haruka enjoying something, even if it was not usual for princes to do such things. As long as he wasn't harming anyone, why should it matter what kind of stuff he enjoys doing? In fact, Makoto found it very impressing that he was able to do something that required so much finesse; he himself would be much too clumsy for anything of that caliber. Then again, Haruka was so elegant and graceful that it really wasn't a surprise that he was good at something like painting.
"I could show you sometime, if you'd like," Haruka offered and although he tried to sound nonchalant, Makoto noticed some kind of timidity in his voice and it was incredibly endearing.

"I'd love that," he beamed. The fact that Haruka was willing to share so many things that were dear to him was really special to Makoto and the feeling it gave him was indescribable.

Haruka bit his bottom lip and averted his eyes again; he was honestly too adorable for words. When he recovered his composure, he turned back to look at Makoto. "What about you?"

"Me?" Makoto questioned in bewilderment. Although it was a very reasonable wonder in this conversation, for some reason he hadn't expected Haruka to ask him in return. It wasn't like he had much spare time to begin with, but he supposed that Haruka could relate to that as well, since he was constantly being prepared for the time when he'll become king. Still, it wouldn't be very believable if he had no hobbies at all. "I like to play guitar," he eventually said, and for once, it wasn't really a lie. "Do you play any instruments?"

"I do," Haruka confirmed with a nod, "I play piano and violin."

"Wow, really? You're so talented, Haru!"

"It's nothing," Haruka brushed off as he turned to face the ground beneath them and Makoto could see a cute blush beginning to blossom on his cheeks. "I was taught more out of obligation than interest. But it's not bad, I suppose." Through the curtain of his hair he looked back up at Makoto, "Do you play any other instruments besides guitar?"

"Ah, no. I sing a little, but that's not really the same as playing an instrument, is it?"

He merely shrugged, almost as if to say that that didn't really matter to him. "I'd love to hear it sometime, if you'd want to sing for me."

"I guess that would only be fair, wouldn't it?" Makoto spoke with a small giggle. If it weren't for all the time he spent singing on the town square then he probably would have been a little hesitant about singing for Haruka, although he had to admit that the thought of singing in front of a crowd filled with strangers did not make him as nervous as the thought of singing for Haruka. Somehow, the need to perform well was even higher now, despite him literally earning a living with it usually. It was most likely because Haruka was so amazing and gifted in every aspect that Makoto felt the need to impress him or at least show him that he wasn't completely worthless at everything. Because for once, he felt the need to be liked by someone. It wasn't that strange though, because this wasn't just anyone, this was Haruka. Beautiful, kind, charming Prince Haruka.

"Do you have any other hobbies?" Haruka asked then, breaking Makoto out of his reverie. "Besides singing and playing guitar."

"Oh, I uh…" Makoto stammered, looking for an answer. After successfully coming up with a hobby he could actually do, he hadn't expected Haruka to ask him for something else as well. While the fact that Haruka was interested in getting to know him better made him really happy, it was pretty troubling. "I like to… read."

The second he said it, he regretted his words. He had just told Haruka that he liked to do one of the things he most definitely could not do. It was just something he could always imagine himself loving, because he always loved the bedtime stories his parents would tell him and even now he still enjoyed the stories they and sometimes he himself would tell the twins before they went to sleep. It was one of the reasons why he'd always dreamt of being able to read; there were thousands of stories out there waiting to be explored yet they were completely out of his reach. But he was
still young and he had faith that one day, he would be able to read a book from cover to cover.

"There's a library inside the palace. I can take you there later," Haruka proposed. "You can read any book you want."

"Oh, I uh," Makoto echoed, knowing that he had brought himself into a tight spot, "Thank you, Haru, I really appreciate that, but for now I'd rather spend some more time with you." And again, it wasn't even a lie.

"Oh," Haruka mumbled in return, looking a bit taken aback by those words. "Alright." The tiny smile that he couldn't repress was quickly becoming one of Makoto's favourite things. Especially because it gave him the feeling that Haruka shared this sentiment entirely.

It didn't take much longer until they got to a small iron gate inside the castle walls at the edge of the gardens, an opening that separated the palace grounds from the outside world. Haruka pulled it open without much effort; it was never locked according to him, which was convenient since it made it easier for him to sneak away. The mental image of Haruka running away from his duties and swimming freely while the servants were panickedly looking for him was amusing and even if he really hadn't known him for long yet, it seemed like something that really fit Haruka.

When they got to the lake, Makoto saw that there was no sand at that there was only grass up until the water's edge. That frightened him, because that most likely meant that there was no shallow part and that the water was deep everywhere. Although there were no beaches in Sano and he had therefore never been to one, he had seen images of it and he had sort of expected this lake to look similar. But he was wrong and that made him a little more hesitant. He did his best to swallow his fear though, for he didn't want to disappoint Haruka and he wanted to experience what it was like to swim since it brought Haruka so much joy.

Haruka stopped near the water and put the basket down on the ground, the motion telling Makoto that he should do the same and he put his basket down next to the other one. Then Haruka lifted the lid of one of the baskets and looked inside, and when he couldn't find what he was looking for, he tried the other one. He pulled out a large, checkered blanket that confirmed Makoto's earlier wonders about a picnic; Haruka most likely brought food for a picnic so they could swim the entire afternoon without having to go back to the castle for lunch. It felt like it was going to be nice and a lot less formal than dinner had been yesterday. But with the king and queen's absence, Makoto expected that any meal that was yet to come inside the palace would be much more casual since it was just Haruka and him. And alone with Haruka, he couldn't feel anything but comfortable even if he got a little embarrassed sometimes.

Makoto grabbed two corners of the blanket and helped Haruka spread it out over the grass. Once it was in place Haruka turned back to the baskets and took two towels out of it, carelessly throwing them on top of the blanket.

In the blink of an eye Makoto heard a loud splash and then he realised that the place that Haruka had previously stood at was occupied by nothing more than the pile of his discarded clothing. Apparently Haruka was also very skilled at quickly undressing himself and though it astounded Makoto, the thing that he regretted the most about this whole situation was that he had missed the assumingly graceful arch of Haruka diving into the water headfirst. When he looked over to the water he saw Haruka's dark hair breaking the surface as he came back up and his beautiful eyes met Makoto's in a questioning look.

"You're so fast, Haru," Makoto remarked and he just received a nod in return.

There was nothing left for him to do but to take off his clothing and he sincerely hoped that in these
past two days he had paid enough attention when Kisumi and Rei helped him so he wouldn't make a fool out of himself when he eventually had to put them on again. He did his best to will his self-consciousness away, but it was easier said than done. Especially since Haruka was still staring at him.

When Makoto looked over to Haruka again he quickly submerged himself once more, most likely feeling caught. It brought an amused smile to Makoto's face, but it also made him feel a little weird. He was glad that Haruka had looked away, though; being undressed in front of him was one thing, but undressing himself while Haruka was watching felt a bit too intimate too soon.

His thoughts were quickly wandering off and he tried to take his garments off as fast as he could, but alas he was nowhere near as supple and agile as Haruka and he clumsily stumbled about as he merely tried to take off his boots. The fear of making a fool out of himself was planned too far ahead in his mind because he was already doing that and he was glad Haruka wasn't watching anymore.

At last he had finally undressed himself and it felt like it had taken much longer than it actually had. Hesitantly he looked over the dark depths of the water and he couldn't help the fright that crept inside of him at the sight of it. Who knew what might lurk in there?

"Are you coming?" Haruka asked, his concern mixed with a hint of impatience. When his eyes found Makoto's naked torso he bit his lip again and turned his face towards the water.

"Y-Yes," Makoto stuttered, which was something he had been doing a lot lately. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that everything was alright. Haruka came here all the time and if there was truly something dangerous hidden in the lake then Haruka wouldn't swim here whenever he pleased. And even if the water was deep and he couldn't swim, Haruka surely wouldn't let something happen to him.

The longer he would dawdle, the more anxious he would get so he decided to just throw himself into the deep already. So he held his breath, pinched his nostrils shut, closed his eyes and jumped in.

The second his head went beneath the water, he panicked. He released his breath and opened his eyes as he frantically flailed his limbs in order to get himself back up, not really knowing where the surface was anymore. When he emerged he took a sharp breath and without realising what he was doing, he wrapped his arms around Haruka's shoulders and clung to him, their bare skin pressing against each other in a way that otherwise would have made Makoto's heart beat out of his chest with nerves and perhaps some excitement, but it was now beating out of his chest with distress and the only thing that was on his mind was that if he let go of Haruka, he would drown.

"I can't swim!" he yelped as he kept kicking his legs, "Haru, I can't-"

"Nagisa," Haruka called, "Nagisa!"

When Makoto finally registered that Haruka was talking to him, he abruptly shut his mouth and stared into Haruka's eyes.

"You can stand here."

At that Makoto stopped kicking and stretched out his legs, feeling the sand at the bottom of the lake beneath his toes.

"Oh."
But despite this, Makoto didn't release his hold on Haruka's body. Both of his feet were flat on the ground and yet Makoto was still drowning within the endless pools of Haruka's blue eyes, that were far more deep and mysterious than the water that enveloped him, keeping him entranced with their beauty.

Then another colour entered his vision: a soft, adorable pink. Haruka was blushing and the sight of it made Makoto realise what kind of situation he had brought them in, their naked upper bodies tightly pressed together and his own cheeks turned red from embarrassment. Immediately he let go of Haruka.

"S-Sorry."

"It's alright," Haruka mumbled as he tried to regain his composure. "Let's try to float first, okay?"

"Okay," Makoto agreed, although he was still a bit hesitant.

Haruka easily noticed his fear and he smiled reassuringly at him. "Don't worry, I'll support you."

Although he had meant it literally, Makoto still felt like it was moral support too and he nodded. Haruka placed his hands on his back and told him to lift his legs, tilting his body so he would float on his back. Makoto tried to keep his breathing steady as he did as Haruka instructed. The vast blue sky greeted him and as he stared at the clouds, he didn't feel afraid anymore. But it wasn't just because he could see the sun and breathe, but also because of Haruka's hands on his skin, holding him up. In his hands, Makoto felt completely safe.

But then Haruka's touch disappeared and with panic beginning to form again, Makoto shot Haruka a look but before he could do anything else, Haruka said, "Relax, you've got this."

And he was right; even without Haruka's hands supporting him, he stayed afloat. Still, he couldn't look away from Haruka's eyes, like the only thing that kept him from sinking was the spell that he had caught him in.

Eventually Haruka gestured that he could get back on his feet and he smiled encouragingly at Makoto. "That was really good," he said and Makoto smiled back at him. "Think you can float on your stomach now?"

That question startled Makoto; he didn't think that floating on his stomach was a thing and the thought of it was pretty scary to him, putting his face underwater again and being unable to breathe. "Okay, I- uh…"

"Are you afraid?" Haruka asked, proving that Makoto was not the only one who could read the other, "To put your head under?"

"A little," Makoto admitted, feeling disappointed in himself. He didn't want to be held back by this fear especially since he didn't know why he was so afraid. But most of all, he didn't want to let Haruka down.

Contrary to what he was expecting, Haruka's smile softened in what seemed to be understanding. "Let's try that first, then. Take a deep breath and slowly lower yourself into the water. Once you're under, slowly breathe out through your mouth and try to open your eyes, alright? I'll do it with you."

Makoto nodded because he did want to try to conquer his fear and when he felt Haruka's smaller hands closing around his, he felt a little more confident. He closed his eyes, feeling comforted by Haruka's hands in his.
"Ready? One, two, three."

On three they both took a large gulp of air before bending through their knees and lowering their heads into the water. Haruka didn't push or pull him, he merely held onto him and that made Makoto feel a bit more safe. He slowly breathed out and he tried to open his eyes.

The water stung his eyes a little but it was clear enough for him to be able to make out Haruka's form. His raven hair was dancing around him in the water, tiny bubbles escaped through his pink lips, and his beautiful eyes were piercing right through Makoto's soul. He was so breathtakingly gorgeous. His fair skin seemed to light up inside the water and at that moment Makoto felt like he was a sailor, lured to his death by the persuasions of an enchanting siren. But Haruka was no siren, he was a merman who was going to save him from drowning.

Their gazes held each other and Makoto didn't feel afraid anymore, he didn't feel anything for he was simply lost in Haruka's eyes. At some point he ran out of air, though, so he had no choice but to resurface and Haruka came up with him.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"It wasn't," Makoto said with a hopeful smile.

"Are you feeling comfortable enough to try floating now?" Haruka questioned, his tone filled with nothing but care and concern.

"Yes."

"Alright, bend at your waist so your upper body is in the water and then slowly lift one leg at a time. Breathe out slowly."

Makoto nodded and did as he had been told, but the closer he came to the water, the more hesitance he felt again. Closing his eyes in the hopes of easing himself, he put his face into the water. His heart began to beat faster again and he didn't dare to lift his legs, feeling like they were the only thing that kept him from sinking to the bottom. When he opened his eyes, he saw nothing but darkness and all of the air that he had stored inside of him to stay underwater was released in one blow and he just felt like he had to come back up again.

"Still scary, huh?" Haruka inquired softly when Makoto stood up straight without completing the task he had been given.

"Yeah… sorry."

"It's alright," he said reassuringly, "I'm sure you'll get used to it and that overtime, you won't feel afraid anymore. Can't expect your fear to be gone after only your first try, after all. For now, we can just swim with our heads above the water. Is that okay?"

Makoto's inner turmoil was halted at these words; he had wanted to swim with Haruka and he was afraid that it wouldn't be possible because he wasn't comfortable with putting his head under. He was really glad that Haruka was so patient with him and that for now, he just wanted to share his joy and have fun swimming with him rather than being insistent to rid Makoto of his fear of the thing he himself loved so much here and now. The way Haruka did everything he could to ensure his comfort and understood him even if he had no reason to since he had no such fears himself was really appreciated by Makoto and it truly showed just how kind and considerate Haruka was.

From then on, Haruka taught him how to swim breaststroke and backstroke. He did tell him not to swim breaststroke too intensively with his head above the water since his back would eventually
hurt because of that, but it wasn't a problem while swimming leisurely and that was what they were doing now. Still, backstroke was more fitting for him because according to Haruka, he had the right build for it; broad shoulders, narrow waist and long arms and legs. Makoto remarked that Haruka had a lot of knowledge of swimming and Haruka explained that he had always been interested in water and swimming and therefore he had read up about it a lot when he was younger.

When Makoto asked him what Haruka's favourite stroke was, he easily answered that he only swam free. Since Makoto didn't know what exactly that entailed, Haruka gladly showed him. Of course, it was absolutely beautiful; it was filled with grace just like everything else he did and while he was swimming Haruka really looked like a merman, merging with the water and becoming one with it. It was no surprise that Haruka could swim like that, and yet it still took Makoto's breath away for it felt like he was witnessing something ethereal from another world, for the mere sight of it was too much for a simple mortal like himself. If he didn't know any better, then he would have thought that Haruka was a prince of the water instead of a prince of the land, for it seemed like he truly belonged here.

It was clear that Haruka was in his element and seeing the sheer happiness radiating off his handsome face made Makoto a lot more confident as well. He barely even made any slip-ups and he didn't stutter or feel embarrassed anymore, because he couldn't think of anything but wanting to make sure Haruka would stay that joyful for the rest of eternity and he couldn't help the desire to be the one who brought that smile to his lips.

All in all, swimming was a lot of fun and Makoto enjoyed it much more than he had initially thought after the fear he had experienced. Whether it was the actual swimming that was fun or simply the fact that he was swimming together with Haruka who was sharing his favourite activity with him, Makoto didn't know, but it honestly didn't matter either. All that mattered was that he was with Haruka and they were having a great time together.

After a few hours of swimming and floating about together, Haruka proposed that they should take a break so they could eat the lunch he had brought and Makoto gladly agreed. Although he was always physically engaging during the day for many of his errands included carrying heavy boxes and crates throughout the town, swimming was exhausting in its own, different but good way. He was using his muscles in a way he never had before and next to that, he had never been one to turn down a tasty meal - unless Ran and Ren or his parents needed or wanted it more, of course - so a little break was very welcome.

Makoto hoisted himself out of the water and then he offered out his hand to Haruka. Even though he didn't need the help since he had swum here on his own countless times before, Haruka still accepted Makoto's hand, allowing him to effortlessly pull him out.

When they were both on land Makoto reluctantly released Haruka's dainty hand again and grabbed the two towels that were lying on the blanket and handed one of them to Haruka, who took it with a small nod of gratitude. Throwing the towel over his head, Makoto began to rub his hair dry but then he halted when he made a grave mistake: he looked over at Haruka and his heart stopped. Haruka's hands were also in the process of drying off his hair for as much as that was possible and the towel was covering his head, seemingly not noticing that he was taking Makoto's breath away and made his heart cease beating.

Water still clung to Haruka's skin, tiny droplets cascading down his torso and disappearing into his knee-length undergarments, that were stuck to his legs in some places. His body was slender but not ravenously thin for there was clear meat on his bones; his ribs weren't protruding and there was only a slight hint of his abdominal muscles and hip bones visible. His skin was fair all-over, from
his beautiful head to his adorable toes with the sole exception of his nipples that were a light pink, contrasting beautifully with the rest of his body. From his long and sculpted legs, to the way his muscles moved beneath his skin and even his cute belly button, everything about Haruka was simply perfect, like he was chiseled by the Gods themselves, crafted to create the most flawless human to ever scrape the surface of this planet. That had to be the truth for Makoto couldn't comprehend how someone as gorgeous and all-around magnificent as Haruka could exist otherwise.

"Are you alright?"

The sound of that captivating voice that fit the rest of his lovely self snapped Makoto out of his trance. "Yes, I'm fine," Makoto confirmed, trying his best to sound honest as he let his towel drop to rest on his shoulders, "I just had some water in my ear, that's all."

"Make sure to dry them properly," Haruka advised good-naturedly, "You wouldn't want to get an ear infection."

"You can get an ear infection from that?" Makoto questioned in disbelief.

Haruka hummed and nodded, and once he was content with toweling himself off he dropped the towel and sat down on his knees on top of the blanket.

"I see. Thanks, Haru," Makoto beamed and he sat down next to Haruka, who had opened the baskets and began to unload them.

Soon enough the entire blanket was filled with boxes and Makoto had scooted over to another part of the blanket so he could properly look at Haruka as they ate. Haruka was pouring them drinks from the small jug that he brought into smaller cups and he told him that he could take anything he wanted. Although there definitely wasn't as much food as there had been yesterday either, there was still more than enough to satiate them both. It was all food that could be served cold and along with all the other aspects of their little picnic, it was easy to tell that Haruka put a lot of thought and care into it.

As always, everything looked absolutely delicious and Makoto didn't know where to start. He reminded himself to be civil and calm while eating, because unlike this morning, he was not by himself this time and he didn't want to make a mess of himself in front of Haruka. Especially not since he really wanted Haruka to have a good impression of him.

Still, when he took a bite of some sandwich that was richly filled with lettuce and tomatoes and some type of meat that he couldn't immediately place, he let out a soft moan. "This is delicious," he mumbled with a full mouth, but then he remembered his manners and quickly swallowed. "Did you make this?"

"No?" Haruka mumbled in confusion, "The cooks did."

Only then did Makoto realise how stupid that question had been; of course Haruka hadn't made this stuff himself. "Oh, well, because you said you dismissed the servants for today," he reasoned, trying to save himself as best as he could, "And it just seemed like something you would be good at."

"I did," Haruka said, nodding like he understood Makoto's question now, "but I did ask the cooks to make us some cold lunch first. I told them they could take it easy with the dinner preparations and that they could just whip up something quick when we get hungry. I hope that's alright…?"
"Yes, of course it is," Makoto murmured with a smile. He was actually rather glad with that, because a quicker dinner with few preparations meant that there would be less food that would go to waste and he could only imagine all the work the cooks had every day so they definitely deserved a break from it all, even if only for a little while.

Despite growing up with all of these luxuries and his status, Haruka wasn't stuck-up or spoilt at all; he was kind and humble and he seemingly didn't take advantage of his privileges nor abuse his power and Makoto really admired that - the mental list of things he admired about Haruka was growing longer and longer with every passing second. He didn't really know the king and queen so it would be unfair of him to judge, but Makoto felt like the air around Haruka differed from the one that hung around his parents: he had an aura of royalty and elegance but he wasn't haughty at all, which was an impression that Makoto did get from King and Queen Nanase. He didn't know much about Iwatobi in general, but if the situation for the common folk was similar to the one in Sano, then perhaps his reign would bring some real change and improve the lives of the poor and unfortunate. People like him.

"Honestly," Haruka continued after having taken another bite of his own sandwich, "I've never tried to cook before, but it does seem like it would be something I'd enjoy."

"Yeah?" Makoto murmured and Haruka nodded as he took a sip of his cup. "Why haven't you tried it, then?"

"I've never really thought about it before. I suppose it's not really 'proper' either, so I'm sure that my parents would have shot it down if I ever brought it up."

"Then why don't you try it now? Your parents aren't here and I'm sure the cooks wouldn't mind having the evening off as well."

"You wouldn't mind?" Haruka inquired, "I've never done it before so I can't guarantee that it will be edible."

Makoto laughed lightly at that. "Of course not. I'm sure it will be fine. I've never cooked before either so we could try it together, if you want."

"I'd like that," Haruka spoke with a small, almost timid smile.

"Great! I'm a little clumsy though, so I'm not sure if I'll be much of a help."

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Haruka assured and Makoto smiled at his words, finding it amusing how Haruka used his own form of comfort against himself. "What do you want to eat?"

Makoto thought about it for a little while. He didn't really have a favourite because any food that filled his stomach was just as good as the next. "What's your favourite food?" he asked, deciding that that was what he wanted to eat.

"Mackerel," Haruka answered without hesitation.

"Then we'll make that."

"Do you like mackerel?" Makoto could swear he saw a glint of excitement inside of Haruka's beautiful blue eyes when he asked that, like he was hoping that he liked it too.

"I've… never had it before," he said, deciding to be honest. He didn't know what it tasted like and he didn't want to say that he liked or disliked it if the opposite turned out to be true. Fish was scarce in Sano because it wasn't located at the coast so all the seafood that was sold was expensive for it
was imported from neighbouring kingdoms like Iwatobi, therefore only the rich and noble ever got their hands on it. He was sure Nagisa and his family did eat fish on a regular basis, so he needed to give a reason as to why he had never eaten mackerel before. "I was allergic to seafood as a child so I haven't had it since then."

"Oh," Haruka sighed, clearly disappointed, "Should we make something else then?"

"Oh no, it's alright. I'm sure I've gotten over it since then," Makoto quickly recovered, smiling awkwardly as he fumbled with the hem of his undergarments at his ankle. "Besides, I want to try it."

"But what if you get sick?"

The worry in Haruka's question softened Makoto's smile into a genuine one. "Thanks, Haru. I really appreciate your concern, but I'm sure it will be fine."

"Well, if you're sure..." Haruka shrugged and he took another sip of his tea. "Come to think of it, I believe we had salmon during dinner yesterday."

"Ah really? See, I didn't even notice that," Makoto chuckled, pretty relieved that his story was plausible.

"Is there anything else you want to eat?" Haruka then asked, "Maybe something for dessert or something?"

Again Makoto had to ponder about that. "Maybe something with chocolate?"

Whenever he passed by the bakeries or the stalls of bakers during the market, everything smelled so good but there was always one thing that stood out to him: chocolate cake. The mere scent and sight of it could make his mouth water and he swore he could practically taste it sometimes. In a distant recollection he could see himself enjoying it, although he wasn't sure if it was an actual faded memory or a far yet vivid dream. Getting a chance to taste it was one of his simplest yet deepest desires but he knew better than to ask for it. Chocolate cake was expensive, a luxury they couldn't afford and with earnings being tight, he had to set priorities and there were so many things that were much more important. So he never dared to wish for it or dream of it, not until now.

"Like chocolate pudding?" Haruka inquired, "Or chocolate cake?"

"I was thinking chocolate cake," Makoto muttered, trying to conceal his elation, "But only if it's not too much trouble!"

"It isn't," Haruka assured with a comforting smile, "Alright, so mackerel and chocolate cake. I'll ask the head chef to give us the recipes when we get back later."

"Sounds like a plan."

They continued to eat with light, pleasant conversation in-between bites. Like he had expected, he felt a lot more comfortable being with Haruka alone, eating in a more casual setting rather than the formal dinner he had attended yesterday. Just like having a meal with his family, eating together with Haruka was pleasant and he enjoyed it a lot. It was not that it was better than being with his family, it was just completely different, a good kind of different that he wouldn't mind experiencing more often in the future.

Once they both had their fill they took the mostly empty boxes off the blanket again and put them back into the baskets. Haruka told him that they had to wait at least half an hour after eating before
they could swim again and although Makoto enjoyed swimming, he didn't mind waiting for a little while. Especially not since the company was as great as it was. They lied down on the blanket together as they waited, watching the clear blue sky in comfortable silence.

After a couple more hours of swimming and having fun together, Haruka and Makoto decided it would be best for them to start heading back. It was slowly getting colder outside and even if the summer's warmth lingered throughout the night, the water would cool down considerably. Besides that, they wanted to have some time to freshen up before they started with their dinner preparations.

The walk back to the palace was a little tiring, yet Makoto barely even noticed it because it seemed to be much shorter than it had been that morning. Although Haruka generally didn't strike him as a very talkative person at first, when they were alone it wasn't hard to sustain an ongoing conversation at all; in fact, the more time they spent together, the more natural it became and they effortlessly flew from one topic to the next, which made the walk back even more pleasant than the way to the lake had already been.

At the doors they had met up this morning they bid their goodbyes for now, promising to meet each other again in the kitchens in about an hour and a half. Then they went their separate ways and even if watching Haruka go made him feel a little empty, it was hard to truly be sad when he knew they would meet up again in less than two hours. Next to that, he was actually quite eager to take a bath and rest up for a little while because he was pretty tired and he wanted to have plenty of energy again to make this evening with Haruka perfect and enjoy it to its fullest.

It was a little struggle to run the shower and bath on his own and to find the right temperature, but once he figured it out it was very pleasant and relaxing in the hot water that filled the large bathtub really helped him unwind. Like the tiredness and aching just seeped out of his pores. Though he dearly appreciated everything he had at home, he definitely wouldn't mind having a tub like this one. He could only imagine, coming home after a long day and plopping down into the warmth, submerging himself and relishing in it. Ran and Ren surely would love to play in a bathtub like this one too. Thinking of it brought a fond smile to his face and he closed his eyes in contentment as he leaned his head back against the rim.

When the water turned cold, Makoto decided it would be best to get out. He had no idea what time it was and he wouldn't want to make Haruka wait for him, so he pulled out the plug and stepped out, towelling himself off as well as he could before he put on the bathrobe that had hung inside the closet since he came here. It was a bit too small on him but that didn't really matter, it was comfortable nonetheless.

Inside his room he saw that he still had more than twenty minutes left before he was expected downstairs and he lied down on the bed, thinking he could rest for a few more minutes before he had to get dressed once more. At that moment there was a soft knocking on the door again and without sitting up, he called for them to come in for it could only be one person.

Like he had expected, it was Kisumi who opened the door and he walked in without hesitation, immediately beginning to talk to Makoto as he walked up to the wardrobe he had hung his own clothing in. He selected another outfit for him and Makoto let him, just putting it on without protest; it wasn't like he knew anything about which garments matched with each other or for what occasions they were worn, so he trusted Kisumi's vision far more than his own. It did baffle him that he needed to wear different clothing now than he had during the day, especially since he had barely even worn them, but Kisumi told him that would be for the best so he accepted it without
questioning it any further.

When he heard about the plans Makoto and Haruka had made together, Kisumi had laughed lightly. What he found so funny was a mystery to Makoto and Kisumi didn't do much to clarify the reason behind his amusement, just told him that he better put on an apron so he wouldn't stain his borrowed garments. That made Makoto pause with a bit of concern, since he was basically the clumsiest person alive; he felt like a walking catastrophe at times and therefore he couldn't rule out the possibility of him ruining Kisumi’s clothing even while wearing an apron. The worried look that was written across his features at that thought made Kisumi laugh even harder than he had before, assuring him that he had just been joking.

With another wish of fun, Kisumi waved him goodbye and when Makoto left the room he didn't feel nervous anymore. Instead, his stomach was jumping with the giddiness of excitement. Even if he wasn't confident in his skills at all, he knew that that didn't matter to Haruka, that he just wanted to spend time with him and enjoy themselves even if the results of their attempts turned out to be a complete failure.

Downstairs he saw that Haruka was already waiting at their agreed spot. He looked up when he noticed Makoto approaching him and an adorable smile stretched his lips, making Makoto naturally smile back at him. When he ran his eyes over Haruka's body, he saw that he was actually wearing different clothing than he had during the day and internally he breathed a sigh of relief, thanking Kisumi in his head for preventing him from making a glaring mistake.

"Good evening, Haru," Makoto greeted, "Were you waiting for long?"

"No, I just got here myself," Haruka murmured with a shake of his head.

"That's good." Makoto would have hated to make Haruka wait for him, though he did get the impression that Haruka always purposely arrived a little early so he wouldn't have to wait for him either. That thought made him feel even warmer inside than Haruka's mere presence already did. "Shall we get started?"

Haruka nodded and opened the door to the kitchen. "After you," he said and he gestured for Makoto to go in first.

"Thanks," Makoto mumbled before he entered the large kitchen.

At this point it really shouldn't be a surprise that every chamber in this palace was bigger than his entire house and his father's workplace combined, yet the sight of such a spacy kitchen still baffled him a little. Especially when he compared it to the tiny kitchenette his mother always had to work with. But when he thought about it, it wasn't that odd considering how much food was prepared here on a daily basis, for even if the royal family only consisted of three people, there were still many servants who needed to eat too and a small kitchen was just not practical in that aspect. Although the sight of the large marble counters and the big pots and pans bewildered him a little, Makoto did his best not to let his wonder show on his face.

But he didn't have much more time to be amazed by the kitchen's size before he was startled by a piece of fabric entering his field of vision and delicate hands at his neck. It took a good second before he realised that Haruka had put an apron over his head and was now tying a knot at his waist to keep it in place.

"Ah, thanks, Haru."

When he looked back over his shoulder he saw the words that Haruka hadn't spoken aloud in his
beautiful eyes, a soft smile adorning his pretty features once more.

"I'll tie yours too," Makoto proposed and Haruka nodded and handed him the second apron, allowing him to put it on for him. Even if he knew Haruka was perfectly able to tie his own apron, he couldn't help but want to do it for him, like it was an excuse to be a little closer to him for a while. It didn't seem like Haruka minded it though. Not at all.

"Thanks," Haruka muttered almost inaudibly, but Makoto had heard it anyway and he smiled at him again. It seemed like he couldn't do anything but smile when he was around Haruka.

"So, mackerel first?"

"Actually, it's better if we start with the cake first," Haruka clarified, "That way it will be done and cooled off by the time we're done with the mackerel so we can dig in immediately without the mackerel getting cold in the meanwhile."

"Ah," Makoto uttered, "I hadn't actually thought about it like that, but that does make sense. Do you have the recipe?"

"Hmm, the chef said he would write down the recipes and that he'd put them on the counter," Haruka said as he walked further into the kitchen, "Here they are."

Makoto went over to Haruka and peered at the sheets of paper that were lying on the marble in front of him. Contrary to the kitchen's size, the fact that the words written were nothing more but vague scribbles that he couldn't make out wasn't a surprise at all. Yet somehow, he hadn't thought that this would pose a problem when he had suggested them trying to cook.

"If you'll read the instructions then I'll try to find the ingredients, alright?" Makoto offered, hoping that his voice would not betray his reasoning.

"Alright," Haruka simply agreed, completely unaware of Makoto's sudden unease. "He even wrote down the placement of each ingredient so it shouldn't be too hard to find."

"That's really helpful, otherwise I'd probably waste hours with just trying to find everything," Makoto commented with a small chuckle.

Haruka nodded. "I'll make sure to thank him again later. And if we destroy the kitchen, I'll apologise too."

At that joking remark Makoto laughed again. "I hope that we don't, but I don't know who he is so in case we do, please apologise on my behalf too."

"I will, I will," Haruka snorted, and the cute smile that he wore showed his pearly teeth and once more Makoto's heart melted inside his chest. "So, first things first: flour. There should be a white bag in the pantry over there." He pointed at a door.

"Alright," Makoto uttered while opening the door Haruka had pointed at and trying to find what he was looking for. There were multiple white bags in the pantry, in varying sizes so he asked, "Which one's the flour?"

"The one that says 'flour'?" Haruka responded, not in a demeaning way but more in a suggesting way, like he wasn't completely sure if the bags actually had labels or writing on them.

The bags did have words on them and it was then that Makoto realised he had made a mistake; he thought that letting Haruka handle the recipes and instructions would make sure that he wouldn't
expose himself but he hadn't considered the possibility that even retrieving ingredients would require reading skills. His mother couldn't read either but she had no problems with cooking because she knew what everything was and where it was kept inside their house, but Makoto didn't have the knowledge nor the familiar environment.

For the first time in hours, panic was beginning to bubble up inside his stomach again, but then the words Rei had spoken to him back in the palace of Sano resonated through his mind again.

"You're a clever man, Makoto. Use your head," he mumbled under his breath in an attempt to stop himself from losing his demeanour.

"Did you say something?" Haruka called from the kitchen.

"No, I was just trying to find the right bag!" Makoto yelled back. There wasn't much time left before Haruka would get suspicious so he had to be quick. He had to use his common sense and through the process of elimination of which were not likely, Makoto was eventually left with two bags. From that point there was a fifty percent chance of getting it right - but also a fifty percent chance of getting it wrong and he didn't know what the consequences would be if he got it wrong. One bag had more letters on them than the other, and "flour" didn't seem like a very long word so the most plausible option was the one with fewer letters but then again, what did he know about writing?

"Oh, and we need baking soda too," Haruka then exclaimed, "That should be over there as well."

Suddenly, Makoto's problems dissolved into thin air; if one of these bags was indeed the flour, then the other should be the baking soda and based on the word lengths that he could make out, he could even tell which one was which. But even if he couldn't, it didn't matter for as long as he brought these two bags Haruka wouldn't notice a thing - unless these bags contained something entirely different but that was an option he wasn't considering at that point. So his three-second turmoil came to an end and he picked up the two bags and went back to Haruka.

"Are these the ones?" he asked just to be sure.

Haruka looked over at the bags and he nodded in confirmation. "Next, two eggs."

Internally Makoto breathed a sigh of relief again. It wasn't like he could mess up with eggs except for accidentally dropping them or something. "Only two?" he questioned in bewilderment.

"Yes," Haruka said and when he saw the look on Makoto's face, he elaborated, "We're only going to make one cake."

"What about the servants?" They needed to eat too and surely one cake wouldn't be enough to feed everyone who lived here.

"They already had dinner," Haruka clarified, "Since I didn't know when we would be back I told them to not wait for us so we're just cooking for the two of us."

"Oh," Makoto sighed for even if it was unrealistic for them to cook for the entire palace when they had no experience whatsoever, that meant that the cooks didn't exactly have a day off, "So they still had to work."

"Hmm," Haruka hummed, "but they all work different hours so it's not like they never have a day off; they switch up the work between themselves. And even if they had a different job, they still needed to cook multiple meals a day for themselves."
"That's true, though I doubt it's as much work to cook for a few people than to cook for a whole palace."

"That's right, which is why it's good that this is their only job. Besides, I'm sure they're all not very eager to be poisoned by two clueless princes."

Makoto giggled softly, "We won't be that bad, will we?"

"I hope not, but if we will and do poison ourselves, it was nice knowing you," Haruka joked and yet there was still a trace of sincerity in his voice that Makoto couldn't explain, but appreciated nonetheless. "But in all seriousness, if we survive and have some leftovers, anyone who dares to try them can."

Once more Makoto couldn't stop himself from laughing lightly at Haruka's remarks, the deadpan expression on his face and in his tone just being so amusing to him. "Enough joking around," Makoto teasingly said, his voice betraying his amusement, "Eggs."

From that point on they continued to gather ingredients and luckily, Makoto didn't encounter the same problem of flour and baking soda again since the other ingredients were much more easy to find. It didn't take very long until Makoto was whisking the batter and the sweet scent of chocolate was already entering his nostrils.

Haruka opened a drawer and took a small spoon out of it, scooping up a tiny bit and he held it to Makoto's lips, offering to let him try it and Makoto eagerly accepted, allowing Haruka to feed him.

"Ah, it's already so good," Makoto moaned, savouring the taste in his mouth, "I could eat it just like this."

"In that case we could have made chocolate pudding instead," Haruka sighed with a shake of his head, though the tiny smile on his lips told Makoto that there was absolutely no malice in the gesture. "Don't eat it like this, though. You could get sick."

"I know, it's just really good! Here, you should try it," Makoto thought, looking down at the spoon and back at the bowl with the chocolate batter, not knowing what to do. But then Haruka shook his head again, this time declining his offer. "I don't know what type of poison you put in it," Makoto stated at Haruka's refusal to try it despite feeding it to him himself, being unable to keep his face and voice straight, "but it really tastes great."

"I believe you," Haruka chuckled lightly and at that moment Makoto was absolutely sure that the sound of Haruka's laughter was the most beautiful sound in the entire world, wanting to capture it so he could treasure and cherish it forever. "I'm just not really fond of sweet food in general."

"Haru, you should have said so! We could have made something else if you don't like sweet food."

"Why? You like it, right?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"We're making the mackerel for me," Haruka interrupted, "and you might not like that either. So it's only fair that we make something you like as well, even if I'm not too fond of it. Besides, I am going to try a slice, but the batter itself would be a little too much for me."

"Alright," Makoto gave in, "but you don't have to push yourself if you don't like it."

"Hm," Haruka hummed in agreement, "Same for you."
Makoto nodded and then he resumed whisking the batter while Haruka got started on making the frosting. They worked together in a comfortable silence and Makoto couldn't help but sneak a glance at Haruka every once in a while. When he looked over and met Haruka's eyes, Haruka quickly looked away again as if he were caught doing the same thing and Makoto pretended not to notice it, simply turning his own head to face the counter.

Then another spoon entered his vision and he unconsciously opened his mouth again. The flavour of chocolate was strong on his tongue once more and the frosting was even sweeter than the batter, tasting like pure heaven.

"Is it good?"

"It's delicious! It might be a little too sweet for you, though."

Haruka shrugged. "If you like it, then it's fine."

Those words brought an appreciative, almost enamored smile to Makoto's lips. "Thanks, Haru."

Once they deemed their work to be done they put the frosting aside and poured the batter in the cake pan, and Haruka put it in the oven.

"So, the mackerel," Makoto said. Because the making of the chocolate cake had been successful up until this point, he was feeling a lot more confident than he had this afternoon when he proposed it, even if making mackerel would be vastly different. And if he somehow was still able to mess up, he was convinced that Haruka would be able to turn the mackerel into a success too.

"Do you want to prepare the mackerel or cut the vegetables?"

"The vegetables?"

"Hm," Haruka affirmed, "As much as I'd like to have just mackerel for dinner, according to the cooks it's not a 'proper' meal on its own so we'll have vegetables and rice too, if that's alright with you."

"I see, that's fine with me," Makoto replied. It wasn't like he knew anything about fish so he wouldn't have questioned it if they only had mackerel, but he had absolutely no objection to having more variety on his plate, especially not if it was nutritious. "If you do the mackerel then I'll cut the vegetables?"

"Alright."

Makoto was glad that Haruka had agreed, for he couldn't read the instructions the chef had provided and since he had no clue how to prepare fish, cutting the vegetables seemed like a much safer option for him.

Haruka told Makoto which vegetables he should get and while he was grabbing and washing some of them, Haruka put on the rice so it could cook slowly while they worked on the rest of the meal, the scent of chocolate wafting from the oven and filling the air around them.

One thing that Makoto hadn't expected when he was cooking was to cry; the strong smell that the onion he was chopping emitted made his eyes itch and water and he did his best to rub them with his wrist, making sure not to use his fingers.

"Do you feel that bad for cutting it?" Haruka teased, and this time he couldn't keep his face straight either, a tiny smirk breaking through his serious expression.
"Yes," Makoto confirmed with a small chuckle as he continued to cut the onion the board, "I hate it because it makes my eyes prickle. The smell is way too strong! I definitely prefer the smell of chocolate."

"I don't like the smell of onions either, which is why I was glad you wanted to do the vegetables."

"Well, I don't find the smell of mackerel to be particularly pleasant either," he admitted, "so I guess it's a win for us both."

"That's because you're not used to it. Once you taste how delightful it is you won't be able to get enough of it. You'll want to smell it every single day," Haruka declared solemnly and Makoto could feel a smile beginning to take form on his mouth again, "Might even want to invest in some mackerel-scented perfume after that."

In an unsuccessful attempt to repress his smile, Makoto bit his bottom lip. "Is that appealing to you?"

"Very," Haruka breathed and at this point neither of them could hold back their laughter and they chuckled softly.

"I see, I'll keep that in mind the- ow!" He was so distracted by Haruka that he hadn't been paying attention to what he was doing and had accidentally cut his forefinger. There was a small gash in his skin and blood was starting to drip out of it in beads.

"Did you cut yourself?" The playfulness that had laced Haruka's beautiful voice was immediately gone as he grabbed Makoto's hand to look at the wound, concern written across his face in a language that Makoto could easily understand. When Haruka raised his finger to his mouth and put his lips around the wound to suck softly, Makoto's heart stopped for the umpteenth time that day.

A fierce blush immediately blossomed on his cheeks and his jaw dropped, gaping at Haruka like a mackerel. Every word that had been in his vocabulary instantly vanished from his mind at the sensation of Haruka's soft lips on his finger, the warmth of his mouth enveloping his skin and when he ran his tongue over the gash Makoto's soul actually left his body and ascended to the upper planes.

It was at that moment that Haruka realised what he was doing and he let go of Makoto's hand like he had been burned, his finger naturally falling from his mouth to rest at Makoto's side again. An adorable pink hue appeared on his otherwise porcelain cheeks and he tried to hide his embarrassment behind his fringe. "I'll go get the first-aid kit."

"Ah, you don't have to, Haru!" Makoto dismissed, waving his hands frantically in front of himself.

"Yes, I do," Haruka protested, "You have to disinfect it."

When Makoto opened his mouth again to tell Haruka that that really wasn't necessary, the piercing look that Haruka shot him made it clear that there was no room for argument.

"Rinse it off under the faucet and sit down," Haruka commanded and Makoto did as he had been told, finding Haruka's concern for him incredibly endearing.

It didn't take long until Haruka was seated next to him, the first-aid kit open on the table next to them. Haruka grabbed a small bottle out of it and Makoto held out his hand, letting Haruka take care of his wound.

"This will probably sting a little," Haruka said as he twisted off the cap. Makoto gritted his teeth in
awaiting but when Haruka let a few drops fall into the gash, it didn't hurt as badly as he had braced himself for. "Does it hurt a lot?"

"No, it's fine," Makoto answered truthfully and Haruka appeared to be relieved.

"You weren't kidding when you said you were clumsy," he remarked as he began to wrap a small bandage around Makoto's finger.

Makoto giggled, "I warned you."

"You have to be more careful from now on, otherwise you will be banished from this kitchen." Although Haruka said it in a teasing manner, Makoto knew that he actually meant it, not wanting him to hurt himself again.

"I'll try my best, but I can't promise anything," he responded, knowing that the chances that he hurt himself again were big, if the tiny scars and marks that littered his hands from all the time spent working in his father's shop were anything to go by. They made him seem like a pretty lousy blacksmith, but truthfully he was just incredibly clumsy with things that required finesse, especially since he often got lost in thought while he worked.

In the meanwhile Haruka had finished wrapping his finger and cut off the gauze from the roll and the end of the bandage usefully stuck to itself. Without thinking Haruka raised his finger to his mouth once more and pressed a tiny kiss against the wrapped-up wound before he quickly put everything back into the box and he got up to put it back.

He was honestly too cute.

Time flew by and before they knew it, their food was ready. They hadn't run into any more problems after they continued and Makoto knew that that was because of Haruka. If he had been on his own, he definitely would have burned the food or hurt himself in another way besides cutting himself. But Haruka had been patient with him, gave him instructions clear enough to understand and therefore everything had been a success.

Now they were sitting across from each other at the table in the middle of the kitchen to reap the fruits of their labour. He had to admit, even if the scent of raw mackerel hadn't been very appetising, now that it had been grilled it smelled really good and he couldn't wait to dig in and try it. Despite claiming to love mackerel so much Haruka hadn't started to eat it yet, like he was waiting for Makoto's reaction first.

Not wanting to leave either of them to wait any longer, Makoto cut a bite-sized piece off the mackerel and ate it, chewing thoughtfully. It was still a little hot so he probably should have blown on it first, but soon an oily yet savoury taste spread through his mouth.

"Ah, it's really good!" Makoto exclaimed once he swallowed.

A tender smile softened Haruka's features. "I'm glad," he said sincerely before taking a bite himself, "You're right, it is pretty good. Maybe not as good as when the cooks make it, but good nonetheless."

"I was right when I said it seemed like something you'd be good at. If you can already make something this good on your first try, I can only imagine what kind of food you'd be able to make after gaining some more experience."
"We made it together," Haruka corrected.

"Yeah but honestly, you did all the hard work," Makoto said, "I only followed your instructions; without you, I would never have been able to make something like this. So really, it's all thanks to you."

"Don't sell yourself short," Haruka murmured, "It's not a contest, and we both did our best. And now we get to eat the results of that together."

"That's true," Makoto chuckled warmly, knowing better than to argue with him, even though he did still think that Haruka would have been fine without his assistance and he only would have made a mess if it weren't for Haruka.

"I was right too," Haruka stated quietly, "when I said that you'd be alright. Except for cutting your finger, then." He paused to take a bite of rice. "And when I said it would be something I'd enjoy."

Hearing those words made the smile that already stretched his lips widen. "I enjoyed it too," Makoto uttered. This time, however, he was completely sure that it was not the actual cooking he had enjoyed, but cooking together with Haruka. He was pretty sure he'd enjoy anything if Haruka was with him. "Except for cutting my finger."

"Does it still hurt?"

"No, I can barely feel it anymore," Makoto replied honestly, tilting his head a bit to the right as he smiled, closed his eyes and beamed, "Thank you, Haru."

"It's nothing," Haruka mumbled and he quickly put another piece of mackerel into his mouth as he averted his gaze, a tiny blush creeping onto his cheeks again.

They continued to eat in silence, but Makoto didn't mind it at all. Simply being together with Haruka was comfortable and pleasant and they actually didn't even need any words for the fact that it could be quiet and still feel so right was more meaningful than any uttered words were; the glances at each other spoke louder than a thousand words could. Makoto didn't even need them to get to know him better, for his quiet mannerisms helped to slot the pieces of the puzzle that was Prince Haruka together just like any conversation would have, and perhaps even more.

When their plates were empty, Makoto felt like he was filled to the brim. He was glad that nothing went to waste and it wasn't like he had to force himself either; they had made just enough food to satiate them both, in contrast to the abundance that the cooks usually put on the table - not that they could help it though, they were merely doing as they were told. Haruka seemed to prefer it this way too and that made him hopeful for the future.

Even though he felt like he couldn't eat another bite, when Haruka returned with two plates of the chocolate cake, he spontaneously grew a second stomach. Haruka put the plates down in front of them and sat down again, and Makoto saw that he had given him a significantly larger slice than he had himself. It made him feel warm inside, for even if he knew Haruka didn't really like sweet food, he still appreciated his thoughtfulness.

Eagerly Makoto tore a piece off the cake and put it in his mouth. This time he had to hold back a moan of delight: the cake was fluffy and a bit moist and the flavour of chocolate was rich on his tongue as he chewed. It tasted like absolute heaven, even more so than everything else he had eaten that day and that said a lot. Like 'heaven' gained a new meaning with every new dish he tried here. Or with every moment he spent together with Haruka.
"It's so good," Makoto spoke with his mouth still full, the taste of a dream come true making him forget his manners for a moment, "Really Haru, you have to try it!"

Haruka did as he had been told and took a bite. "It's good," he confirmed, "Not as good as the mackerel, of course, but good. It's not too sweet and I like that."

"I'd say that we did a pretty great job," Makoto said after another bite, feeling glad that Haruka was enjoying it too despite usually not liking this sort of food. Then his eyes fell on the corner of Haruka's mouth where a small smudge of frosting lingered, clinging to his skin. Before Makoto knew what he was doing, he reached out to Haruka to wipe it away and then he promptly put his finger in his mouth to suck the chocolate off. When he realised what he'd just done, he blushed all the way up to his ears.

"S-Sorry."

"It's alright," Haruka mumbled and his cheeks lit up in a colour that matched his own.

Fortunately, the awkwardness never lingered and a comfortable silence settled between them once more as they ate their cake.

After they were done eating, they did the dishes together. The servants had apparently told Haruka that he could just leave everything as it was and that they would take care of it, but Haruka thought that they should clean up their own mess and Makoto wholeheartedly agreed. While Haruka washed the dishes, Makoto dried and even if this usually would have been the perfect opportunity to tease each other, Makoto didn't want to lose his attention to what he was focusing on or otherwise there would be shattered plates on the floor in no time. One look into Haruka's beautiful blue eyes told him that he was thinking the exact same thing.

Once the kitchen was spotless again, Haruka and Makoto decided to retire for the night. Cooking, eating and cleaning had taken much longer than they initially thought and it was quite late already. Since they were both exhausted from the day, it would be better to go to bed so they wouldn't be too tired tomorrow. And yet Makoto couldn't help the reluctance in his heart at the thought of having to part with Haruka again.

"I'll walk you to your room," he offered in an excuse to be with him for just a little longer, before he got a bit unsure as to how Haruka would interpret those words so he added, "If you want me to, at least."

"Alright," Haruka accepted, and though he tried to sound nonchalant, Makoto could somehow still feel a hint of relief emitting from him.

They walked through the large palace corridors in silence, simply enjoying each other's presence and before Makoto even knew it, Haruka came to a halt in front of a white door.

Knowing that this was truly the moment of their separation, Makoto smiled once more before he said, "I had a lot of fun today, Haru. Thank you."

"I had fun too," Haruka confessed, staring bashfully at their feet.

"Um, Haru?" Makoto asked to gather Haruka's full attention once more, deciding just to ask the question that had been on his mind the entire way here. "I was wondering if you'd like to have breakfast together tomorrow…?"

A look of surprise appeared on Haruka's face before he smiled as well. "I'd like that."
"So, tomorrow at eight?" Makoto proposed, for even if he'd enjoy to sleep in since he was never able to do that at home, he actually wanted to make the most of every moment he had here and while he could sleep back in Sano, he couldn't be together with Haruka there.

"That's fine," Haruka approved with a small nod.

"Great! Well, then. Goodnight, Haru."

"Goodnight."

Before Makoto knew what was happening, Haruka got up on his toes, lightly gripped his shoulders and pressed a small kiss against his cheek, right beside his mouth. As soon as he felt it, it was gone and with the click of a door swinging open and shut again, Haruka had disappeared into his room and he was alone in the large corridor.

Instinctively Makoto raised his hand to his red cheek, touching the place where Haruka's soft lips had been just a few seconds ago and he couldn't repress the laughter that bubbled up inside of him, feeling simply too much elation to contain within himself. His heart fluttered inside his chest as butterflies roamed through his belly and made his entire body tingle with happiness.

He was honestly too cute.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed! If you did, please consider letting me know! ^^

You can come and talk to me over on Tumblr or Twitter @DatHeetJoella if you'd like.

Again, thank you for reading, I wish you all a wonderful day and I hope to see you at the next chapter! ^^
Blooming

Chapter Summary

Haruka and Makoto grew closer and closer as they shared a piece of their lives with each other, and Makoto could no longer deny the feelings that were steadily budding in his heart.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for reading up until this point and leaving kudos and comments, that really makes me happy and motivates me to write even more.

I'm currently writing chapter six as we speak so I hope I can keep the schedule of an update around the beginning of the month up. This chapter is quite long though, so proofreading took me a little more time than it usually would have (which causes for it to be officially the 2nd already where I live) but I still did my best to get it out here as soon as I could.

Same disclaimer as always, this fic is set in a fantasy universe rather than a historical one. I don't really have anything else to say here, so I hope you'll enjoy the chapter!

If breakfast had been good yesterday, then it was absolutely perfect this morning; the food was amazing and the company was even better. It was the second meal Makoto had at the large dining table yet unlike the first time, he now felt comfortable and completely at ease. Dinner with the king and queen present had been laced with unease and now he knew that they weren't too happy with the arrangement after all, he was glad they were gone for otherwise he could imagine them trying to spot any tiny mistake he could make so they had an excuse to blow this whole thing off. But now, he knew that he didn't have to worry about his appearances because he was alone with Haruka and even if it sounded ironic, Makoto felt like he could truly be himself when he was with him. It was incredibly easy to forget for what purpose he was even here because his mind was mostly occupied with the beautiful boy that was currently seated across from him, thoughtfully sipping his tea.

Even if he'd rather not make a fool of himself in front of Haruka, he wasn't constantly cautious or guarded like he probably should be; he knew Haruka wouldn't judge him for anything since he had proven himself to be quite the peculiar one as well, though in ways that only made Makoto more fond of him and that encouraged his curiosity and interest to get to know every last part of him, how odd they might be.

Once again, breakfast together with Haruka was vastly different from having breakfast with his family and he actually rather liked this change. He loved his siblings, he really, really did, but he was not a morning person at all and their loud and excited chattering was sometimes just a little too much for him if he had just woken up. So to have breakfast in a comfortable silence that was only
occasionally disrupted by a soft murmur of a gentle voice was a very nice alternative. Even though Haruka did seem to be a lot more awake than he was, he could probably tell that Makoto was still a little drowsy and allowed him to take his time to gather himself rather than attempt to hold a deep conversation and once again, Makoto really appreciated his considerateness.

Now surrounded by tranquility like he hadn't been in quite some time, he felt peaceful and secure and even if he wouldn't trade his family for the world, he wouldn't mind getting used to mornings like these. Mornings where everything was calm and quiet, with delicious food and most importantly, with Haruka.

With every bite he took remnants of the lingering sleepiness seeped out of his pores and gave him a little more energy, though arguably not as much as the somewhat tender gaze that Haruka's eyes held when he looked over at him. The butterflies that had roamed through his belly yesterday had multiplied since then and he really needed to figure out a way to get control over them or otherwise he'd have no more room for the remainder of his breakfast.

Fortunately these feelings that were surging through him did not make him lose his appetite and he was able to eat his fill like he had almost grown accustomed to; it was like his stomach had expanded two sizes since he came here and it was most likely going to be difficult to get used to getting the bare minimum again, but that was not something he was considering at that moment. Although his mind was usually full of worries and concerns for the future, it was practically impossible to ponder about what comes after this, for one look at Haruka and everything else vanished from his thoughts, like no time existed except for the here and now.

After their meal, Haruka invited him to come with him and of course Makoto agreed, not entirely knowing what to expect but trusting Haruka enough to follow him blindly. Besides having breakfast together, they hadn't discussed what they were going to do for the day yet Haruka did seem to have a plan, just like he had yesterday. It made Makoto curious as to where Haruka would take him and what they would do, but for some reason, he couldn't find the words to ask him about it, like he unconsciously wanted to be surprised by Haruka.

As they strolled through the hallways of the palace that were slowly becoming familiar to Makoto, he was briefly worried that Haruka would take him to the library he had mentioned yesterday. But that fear was gone as soon as it had come when they came to a halt at the same door they had last night. Haruka's bedroom.

Thoughts were rapidly coursing through his head because he had no idea what they were doing here. As far as he had understood, bedrooms were supposed to be private, at least for the royal and noble and one was not lightly invited inside, save for the staff then. Did Haruka simply need to grab something from his room or was he actually allowed to tread into Haruka's personal space?

When Haruka opened the door and gestured for him to go inside, he was even more confused. There was only one thing he could imagine one would usually do in a bedroom and surely Haruka didn't plan on doing that, right?

Despite the uncertainty of what awaited him inside, he entered the room anyway. His inner turmoil continued and while his mind was full of thoughts of regardless how much he liked Haruka, he had never done anything like that before and he was sure he wasn't ready for something like that yet, Haruka closed the door behind them and walked up to him.

His small hand touched Makoto's arm and without missing a beat Haruka asked, "Are you alright?"

Upon feeling his touch and hearing the confusion combined with concern lacing his voice, the thoughts disappeared as he realised how stupid they had been. Of course Haruka wasn't planning
on doing *that*, he hadn't said or done anything to indicate that he was and Makoto's mind was just getting ahead of itself. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Alright," Haruka repeated as he walked further into his bedroom and Makoto's eyes followed his form and fell on the easel that was in the corner of the room, right next to the glass doors that led to the balcony and everything made sense to Makoto then. Haruka was going to show him his artwork like he had promised he would yesterday. For some reason, that hadn't crossed Makoto's mind at all despite not having forgotten about it, he just hadn't expected Haruka to show him so soon. After all, he could imagine it being something very personal and not something he'd just want to share with the world, so the fact that Haruka was confident enough to show him really meant a lot to Makoto.

But when he got closer to the easel he saw that the canvas that was perched on it was blank.

"Please take a seat," Haruka requested and he gestured to the red, velvety fauteuil that was standing about two meters from the easel.

Makoto did as he had been told and Haruka's intentions suddenly seemed as clear as water, yet that couldn't be it, could it? It couldn't hurt to ask, though. "Are you… are you going to paint me?"

At that Haruka nodded. "If that's alright with you…?"

"Well yes, but, I mean…" he stammered, feeling shyly honoured at the fact that Haruka would consider painting him, "If it's not too much effort."

"It's not," Haruka assured with a small smile, "I like to paint and I… I want to paint you. So, can I?"

Haruka's bashful words made Makoto's skin tingle and he blushed brightly. "Of course, Haru. I'm truly honoured that you would want to paint me."

"I'm not a professional, though, so don't expect it to be as good as other portraits that were made of you," Haruka quickly excused as he averted his eyes, completely unaware of the fact that Makoto had never actually been painted before. The soft pink that dusted his cheeks was slowly but surely becoming Makoto's second favourite colour: placing only after the beautiful blue of his breathtaking eyes. But before Makoto had the chance to mutter an assurance to Haruka's timid words and expression, he continued to speak as he faced him again. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure?" Haruka questioned at the way Makoto was currently sitting, putting on a smock to protect his clothing from the paint, "You're going to have to sit still for quite some time, at least a couple of hours. Are you sure you'll be able to keep that position for that long?"

Makoto hadn't actually considered that aspect of being painted despite it being incredibly obvious and he leaned back against the back of the chair, settling himself in it as he placed his feet flat on the floor and put his arms on the armrests.

"That's better," Haruka said with a small chuckle and he went over to his easel and grabbed his palette, "Ready?"

"Whenever you are," Makoto confirmed and when Haruka nodded and began to mix his paints, he tried to keep his face straight and to breathe as lightly as possible.

Haruka turned his head back to look at Makoto and he snorted at the stiff and unnatural way
Makoto held his body in an attempt to keep himself as still as he could. "You can just breathe, you know? And talk. And even scratch or stretch yourself. As long as you return to the same position and don't move around too much, you're fine. So relax."

"Alright," Makoto chuckled breathily and he released the tension in his body, sinking further into the fauteuil. He had wanted to keep as still as possible to make everything easier for Haruka but on second thought, he probably wouldn't be able to keep sitting that way for very long. Especially considering the aching state his muscles were in after yesterday.

Even if he hadn't swum very intensively, it had been his first time and he had used his muscles for hours in a way he never had before, so it was no surprise that he was a little sore in places - though it was absolutely nothing he couldn't handle. That was also one of the reasons why he was quite pleased with Haruka wanting to paint him; besides obviously being elated that Haruka wanted to spend an extensive period of time staring at him and capturing his image on canvas with his artistic skills, he was also really glad that rather than doing something that required a lot of physical exertion, for once he could simply sit and relax.

Another aspect that was enjoyable about Haruka painting him was that Makoto could watch him work; the neutral yet focused look that was on his face as his eyes drifted between Makoto and the canvas in front of him and the way his arm moved as he applied stroke after stroke with his brush, like the tool was an extension of himself, everything about it was simply gorgeous and like everything else Haruka did, it was filled with a regal kind of grace - his mind filled in the blanks of the parts of Haruka that were concealed by the easel because the parts that he could see were enough for him to paint the whole picture in his head.

He partially had to agree with King and Queen Nanase: Haruka's extraordinary beauty was something that deserved to be eternalised so he could be admired forevermore, but he highly doubted that there was an artist out there who was skilled enough to make a painting of Haruka that would do him justice. And he also had to disagree with them, because he could never disapprove of something that Haruka enjoyed doing, especially not if he looked so serene and content while doing it.

Even though he could stare at Haruka for the rest of eternity and die happy, Makoto couldn't help the urge of wanting to let his eyes wander through Haruka's chamber. He didn't intend to be creepy or weird about it, but he was just incredibly curious about everything concerning Haruka and he was interested in getting to know him fully and his room was a part of him; he slept here and apparently painted here so he definitely spent a good portion of his day here, so it wasn't odd that Makoto was curious, was it? The chances of getting an opportunity like this again in the future were very small so he had to seize it while he could, he thought.

So he allowed himself to look around for as much as he could without turning his head too much; he wouldn't want to inconvenience Haruka after all.

Right next to the chair Makoto was currently seated in stood a large canopy bed with the headboard against the wall, the long, blue-grey curtains drawn back to the posters to reveal the neatly made sheets that were rather simple: white with light blue stripes, and a couple of white pillows rested at the head. At the other side of the room he could see a bunch of doors that were presumably closets and a desk with a chair and some books stood atop of it, but other than that it was very neat just like the bed was. Then there was another door that most likely led to his bathroom, and though it was closed and therefore he couldn't see, Makoto imagined him having a bathtub that was as big as the one in his guest room, if not even bigger than that, considering his love for the water.
The last thing he was able to see was the little corner with his easel and the table that held all of his supplies; although Haruka hadn't told him, somehow Makoto knew that that wasn't his usual spot but rather that he moved it around to wherever he pleased at a certain time. For now, he had settled a chair right next to the glass doors so the light would illuminate Makoto's body yet the sun wouldn't bother him for he was standing next to the wall himself. How Makoto knew this wasn't clear to him because he had the artistic knowledge of a mackerel yet somehow he felt like he just understood Haruka, however pretentious that may sound.

The entire room was clean and tidy, and even though Makoto knew that Haruka had maids cleaning it for him, for some reason he felt like Haruka would keep it tidy and clean even without the maids doing it for him. That was the impression got from him yesterday, when he had said that they should clean up their own mess. Next to that he just seemed like a very tidy person, though the current state of his work station would suggest otherwise, but that didn't count because he was still using it and Makoto was confident that once he was done, his paints and brushes would be returned to their rightful place and any mess that was left behind would be cleaned up.

There wasn't much more of his room visible from Makoto's viewpoint, but Haruka didn't exactly strike him as a very materialistic person so he didn't think there was much more furniture besides the necessities. Feeling content after studying the chamber for a little while, Makoto's attention naturally drifted back to Haruka.

"Have you been painting for long?" Makoto wondered, breaking the comfortable silence that hung in the air between them.

"Hm," Haruka hummed softly in confirmation and he looked so concentrated on what he was doing that Makoto thought that was the only response he was going to get and that he shouldn't ask him more in fear of disturbing him, but then Haruka elaborated, "Since I was a child. My parents condoned it back then since they saw it as a child's thing to do. But as I got older and continued to request the supplies, they tried to deny me of them, but my grandmother told them that they should just leave me be and comply with my demands since they weren't outrageous. Fortunately they felt like they had to listen to her, being the former queen and all."

"That was very kind of her," Makoto commented, feeling like the lady in question was really important to Haruka.

"She was very kind," Haruka said and the look on his face told him that he missed her a lot and it made Makoto wish that he could have met her.

"Have you ever painted her?" he asked, curious to see what she looked like and even if other artists had definitely made portraits of her since she used to be the queen, Makoto dearly wanted to see her in paintings made by Haruka, like he was looking through his eyes and see her with the warmth she always emitted to him.

"A few times. But that was back when she was still alive and even though she always praised me, those paintings weren't really good. I mainly paint sceneries; oceans and beaches, gardens, fields of flowers and forests, stuff like that, so people are not exactly within my realm of expertise, and they certainly weren't back then."

"I'm surprised you wanted to paint me, then," Makoto muttered, feeling even more honoured than he had before.

At that Haruka shrugged, trying to come off as nonchalant with the gesture. "I suppose I felt inspired to make a portrait for the first time in a while." Those were the words that he spoke, but Makoto could catch a deeper meaning behind them, like there were more words hidden beneath
them that he was too embarrassed to utter aloud.

*I want to capture you because you inspire me.*

Even if he most definitely had not heard those words, he could feel them burning inside of him, like they were permanently etching themselves in the walls of Makoto's heart, to be felt forevermore. Intense warmth blossomed in his stomach and ignited a fire that sent sparks throughout his entire body.

Once more he felt like he was getting ahead of himself but he couldn't help the warmth that accompanied the thought that he could possibly be special to Haruka; although Haruka hadn't told him specifically, Makoto got the impression that the last portrait he completed was one of his late grandmother and she meant a lot to him, so the fact that he was making a painting of him now could mean that Makoto could be meaningful to him too. In a different way than his grandmother, of course, but meaningful nonetheless and once that thought entered his mind, the desire for it to be true gushed through his veins and tightly grasped his heart, knocking the wind out of him. At that moment there was nothing he wanted more dearly than to be special to Haruka.

Perhaps it was wishful thinking that had replaced his common sense, but when he looked back at Haruka and saw that pink blush adorning his face again, it didn't seem as far-fetched or unachievable as he expected.

He was most definitely getting ahead of himself.

Hours passed as Haruka worked and Makoto just sat in the chair, pleasantly conversing the majority of the time; if it weren't for that Makoto could have easily fallen asleep, though the excitement that was still tingling in him would probably have kept him awake as well. The conversation held depth yet somehow it felt like it was just small-talk. Even though Haruka didn't really seem like someone who would just lay himself bare to everyone he met, he told Makoto surprisingly much and that could only mean that he trusted him enough to share so much of himself with Makoto; they talked about his grandmother, his parents, his childhood of growing up as the crown prince.

In return he asked Makoto questions too and though that was not exactly the most convenient thing for him, he did truly appreciate the genuine interest Haruka had in him. Having to lie so much made him feel incredibly bad so he did his best to tell as much of the truth without accidentally exposing himself and otherwise he relayed what Nagisa had told him as if they were his own experiences.

This was another reminder that things were simply not going to happen the way it seemed right now and that made Makoto sad, for he deep down wished this was actually real. But if he really was himself, then he never would have met Haruka in the first place and that would have been a great loss, so he just had to accept the price he had to pay for this opportunity. Even if not being able to be truthful and honest like he was always taught hurt immensely, he did his best to forget about the harshness of reality and the consequences that he was going to have to face in the end. This time with Haruka really was a once in a lifetime experience so he couldn't allow himself to ruin this precious chance by thinking too much. For now, he had to treasure every second he could be by Haruka's side and he wouldn't let any of them go to waste by his own emotions.

At last Haruka put his palette and brush down, pulling the smock over his head.

"Are you done?" Makoto asked in bewilderment; the hours seemed to have passed much faster than they actually had and even though Makoto knew that it was well into the afternoon already, he hadn't thought that Haruka would be able to finish it up so quickly.
"Not completely, but most of it. I think it's almost time for lunch so I'll finish the rest of it later," Haruka explained, "I mainly focused on you so you won't have to sit around after this."

A grateful smile appeared on Makoto's face at Haruka's considerateness, though he had to admit that he wouldn't mind sitting here for a little longer - or a lot longer -, not when he got to spend time with Haruka. "Can I see it?"

"Of course, that was kind of the whole point, was it not?" Haruka said with a chuckle.

"Yeah," Makoto affirmed and he got up and stretched his back. Although he liked that he was able to sit down for a couple of hours, he had become quite stiff and his joints cracked softly, and he rolled his shoulders in the constricting fabric of the suit he was wearing. "But perhaps you wanted to wait until it's done and show me then."

"No, it's alright. You can see it now," Haruka mumbled and Makoto could tell that he appreciated Makoto's respect for his privacy and possible boundaries.

"Alright," Makoto echoed and he walked over to Haruka. When he laid his eyes upon the canvas that rested on the easel, his jaw dropped.

The painting was absolutely gorgeous. Makoto knew what he looked like, he had seen his own image in the mirror countless of times, but he didn't look like this; his brown locks almost looked golden with the way the light caught them, his features seemed sharp yet somehow soft at the same time, and his eyes were so green that they practically popped off the canvas. The boy on the canvas was incredibly handsome but he didn't look like him, because he was not this beautiful, he was not this confident, and he was certainly not this regal.

"It's beautiful," he couldn't help but gasp, because it truly was. It was realistic and detailed, like he had paid attention to even the tiniest of things. If Haruka claimed that people weren't within his realm of expertise, then Makoto couldn't even begin to imagine what his sceneries must look like for this was truly the most beautiful piece of art he had ever seen. He wanted to say more to express his admiration but he was utterly speechless. If this was the painting Haruka had made with him as the model, then that could mean that this was how Haruka saw him and that thought made his skin prickle with excitement and elation.

"Thank you," Haruka murmured, averting his eyes from Makoto's face to look back at the painting, "It's not very accurate though."

"It's not," Makoto agreed, "I am not this beautiful."

At the same time, Haruka stated, "It does not properly capture your exceptional beauty."

When they realised what the other had said - and, in Haruka's case, what he had said himself - bright blushes lit up their faces as they both looked away. An indescribable feeling overwhelmed Makoto, making his heart beat so much faster than it did before. The fact that Haruka considered him to be this beautiful made him unbelievably happy, and to think that he wasn't satisfied with this marvelous piece of art he had created simply because he thought it did not accurately portray his appearance for he found it to be even more beautiful made every cell in his brain stop functioning. He did not know what took his breath away more: this exquisite painting or Haruka's words.

Not knowing how to respond to those words, Makoto awkwardly cleared his throat and made an attempt to change the topic. "I thought you said it wasn't finished?"

"It isn't," Haruka said in confirmation, visibly relieved by Makoto's diversion. When he read the
confusion in Makoto's eyes, he elaborated, "It needs some more refinements and detailing, especially the background."

"Oh," Makoto muttered, trying to see what Haruka meant but failing to do so; he didn't see what could be added to improve this painting for it already seemed beyond perfect to him, but then again, he had zero artistic knowledge so he trusted Haruka's vision on it far more than his own.

"I need to add some more shades and lights to create more depth, and some other things," Haruka clarified with a small smile, "Once it's done, you'll be able to tell the difference."

Haruka had said it with so much certainty that Makoto couldn't help but believe him, so he smiled back at him before he turned to look at the painting again, wanting to memorise every line and stroke so he would actually be able to see the difference once Haruka finished it.

Now that the initial surprise at Haruka's talent had dwindled, he wanted to comment on the painting some more. But before he got the chance to speak up, there were three soft knocks on the door.

"Told you so," Haruka mumbled under his breath before he called out, "Come in."

Makoto hadn't known what Haruka meant with his teasing remark, but then the door swung open to reveal a servant.

"Your Highness," he addressed them politely with a small bow, "Lunch is being served."

"Alright," Haruka replied, "We'll be down in a minute. Thank you."

With another bow the servant took his leave again, closing the door behind him. The quick exchange of words cleared up what Haruka had been referring to. "You were right," Makoto affirmed with a small chuckle.

"I always am," Haruka nodded, snorting lightly. "I need to clean this up a little, so you can go downstairs to have lunch first."

"I'll help."

"No, it's alright," he declined, "Your food will get cold. I'll join you as soon as I'm done."

"Your food will get cold too," Makoto argued, "And if I help you it'll be done sooner and perhaps our food will be lukewarm when we get there. Just tell me what I need to do and where I need to put everything."

Haruka eyed him challengingly. "You're rather stubborn."

"I could say the same about you," Makoto countered, not backing down from this challenge.

Hints of a smirk were beginning to form on Haruka's face and he quickly turned his back to Makoto, letting out a deep sigh in feigned exasperation. "Here," he said when he turned back, handing Makoto a couple of paint brushes, "You can rinse these brushes off, but be gentle on the bristles. The bathroom's over there."

A grin stretched Makoto's lips at Haruka's surrender. "Gentle on the bristles, got it!" he chuckled as he accepted the brushes and walked over to the door Haruka had nodded at - which confirmed his earlier speculations.
And like he had expected, his bathtub was massive.

Once all of Haruka's supplies were cleaned and cleared away, they left Haruka's room to go back to the dining room they had come from earlier that day.

"So," Haruka started when they were walking through the large palace corridors, "Since I showed you my hobby, will you show me yours later?"

Makoto chuckled, "I suppose that's only fair." After all that Haruka had done for him, singing him a song or two was really the least he could do to pay him back.

Haruka smiled tenderly at the words he spoke, probably recalling him saying something similar when they discussed it yesterday. "I'll be looking forward to that, then."

"I'm not a professional though, so don't expect me to be as good as other singers you've heard," Makoto teased, but he did really mean it. Though it could also raise the bar for himself since Haruka's painting skills had definitely been able to match up to - and even exceed - that of professionals, so that could mean that the same was to be expected of him.

"Oh shut up," Haruka grumbled, averting his head from Makoto. The way he bit his bottom lip to prevent himself from smiling made Makoto giggle, which in turn made Haruka snort lightly as well. "I'll judge that for myself."

"I'm just warning you, keep your expectations low. You don't want to be disappointed," Makoto joked, but again, he did sort of mean it.

"It could never disappoint me," Haruka said softly before he raised his voice and faced Makoto again with a small smile, "But alright. I'll expect absolutely nothing so I can only be pleasantly surprised."

Those genuine words brought an enamored smile to Makoto's face as well and the nerves he had about it before returned. They would have made him jittery but Haruka's presence was comforting and grounded him, preventing him from getting too anxious about it. There was still a small part of him that was a bit hesitant; even if Haruka had said that he couldn't be disappointed, Makoto still worried that he would do just that. But those worries were for later, so it was no use to get worked up over it already.

When they got to the dining room the table was already set and once they sat down the staff immediately began to serve their food, which meant that they had been waiting for them and that made Makoto feel bad. Then again, if he hadn't helped Haruka then it would have taken even longer.

"Thank you," Makoto said when a servant put down his plate in front of him. The servant nodded in acknowledgement of his words before she left again.

"Thanks," Haruka muttered to the man who served him, but before he could stalk off, he continued, "Could you prepare the ballroom and gather some of the staff members who play an instrument and ask them to go there in about an hour and a half?"

"Certainly, Your Highness," the servant nodded solemnly, "Anything else?"

"No, that's it. Thank you."
"Alright. Please enjoy your meal." With that, the man took his leave.

"The staff can play instruments too?" Makoto wondered, actually surprised at the thought of that. Like Nagisa had told him when they first met, Makoto had always been under the impression that only the wealthy and noble had access to instruments, with the exception of orchestras then.

"Some can. My parents think that it's valuable to have multifaceted staff so many servants who are born and raised in the palace are taught to play an instrument," Haruka explained, "We do hire an orchestra for balls and banquets since there are not nearly enough staff members who actually play an instrument, and next to that they have different things to do during formal gatherings like that. So them being taught to play instruments is mainly for private entertainment purposes."

"I see."

"It's not obligatory though, those who learn to play do so of their own interest," he added, most likely wanting him to know that they didn't force their staff to do anything, but that they were treated well. "But most people want to, especially since they're free to choose what instrument they would like to play."

"I can imagine," Makoto said honestly. He had already gathered that everyone who worked and lived here was treated well, both from the things Haruka told him and the general way the staff regarded the royal family; so far he hadn't seen anything but genuine respect from every servant he encountered and that said a lot, he thought. "I don't think many people would refuse when presented with the opportunity."

"Some do, and some others stop while they're learning it because they find it too hard or simply don't enjoy it. It's all fine, it's their own choice after all."

"That's very kind of you, Haru," he thought, knowing that this tradition has probably been in his family for decades already and that Haruka was just raised with it, but finding it to be fitting of his free-spirited mindset all the same.

At that Haruka's cheeks turned a shade darker. "We should eat. The food really is cold now," he mumbled, a bit of bashfulness evident in his voice and he averted his beautiful eyes once more, staring pointedly at his plate.

"You're right," Makoto agreed, deciding to spare him from any more embarrassment, even if the sight of that blush on his face was incredibly endearing.

Despite being a little flustered, Haruka couldn't help but say, "I always am," again.

And again, Makoto couldn't repress his laughter at that statement.

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After they had eaten their fill, Haruka led him to the ballroom. It was near the throne room and when Haruka opened the doors, Makoto was still a bit astonished by the size of it; it was incredibly large, much larger than the town's square he was used to performing at and he could only imagine how his voice would echo if he sang here, not only because was it larger than the town's square, but also because it was empty, which the square never was.

Sunlight shone through the massive windows that made up the entirety of the outside wall, the only exception being the double doors that lead out to the balcony, bathing the marble floor in a
soft yellow glow. On the left side of the room there was a podium that was assumably for the orchestra, if the chairs and music stands that some of the servants were setting up was anything to go by, right next to a black grand piano. A couple of other servants were bringing in instruments: from cellos to oboes and many other string and wind instruments, they seemingly had it all here in the palace - not that that surprised him, not at all. From the sight of the room, it was obvious that it was intended for balls and masquerades and the likes of that. Though that was not much of a surprise either, for the kingdom of Iwatobi was large and wealthy, much more so than its neighbouring kingdoms like Sano, and Makoto supposed it was only natural for them to frequently organise formal gatherings.

Despite knowing that it was not an instrument that belonged in an orchestra, Makoto still searched for a guitar among the masses of clarinets and trombones, but ultimately couldn't find one.

"Um, do you happen to have a guitar too?" Makoto couldn't help but hesitantly ask, "I know it's not used in orchestral music but I'm used to accompanying myself so…"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think we must have one around here somewhere," Haruka muttered, seemingly in deep thought before he called out, "Sir Minami?"

A fairly young man walked up to them. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"Do you know if we have a guitar?"

Sir Minami was quiet for a second and looked at the ceiling as he pondered, before looking back at them. "I believe we do."

"Can you go look for it and bring it here if you find it?"

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Thanks," Haruka said and the man nodded at them before he left the room. "Oh, but will you be able to play?" he suddenly asked, his voice full of concern. When Makoto looked at him in confusion, he explained, "With your finger."

Then Makoto understood what he meant; he was referring to the finger he cut yesterday. "Yeah, it's fine," he assured and he held up his finger to show him. He had already taken the bandage off before he went to bed last night and while the gash was still prominent, he was letting it breathe so it could heal better. "The cut's not as deep as it seemed yesterday."

"Alright, that's good," Haruka murmured, sounding genuinely relieved and Makoto truly appreciated his sincere worry for him.

"Thank you, Haru."

"It's nothing," Haruka brushed off again as he looked away, blushing slightly and the endearing sight only made Makoto smile more.

Soon enough the servants were done setting up the equipment and Haruka and Makoto thanked them for their work before they took their leaves as well, leaving the two of them behind in the large, mostly empty ballroom.

This was supposed to be the moment Makoto showed Haruka what he liked to do in his spare time, but since they were still waiting for the guitar that may or may not be somewhere around the palace, Makoto also wished to hear some of Haruka's musical talent. He might be pushing his luck, but he couldn't help but ask.
"You mentioned you play piano and violin, right?" Makoto started with a somewhat sheepish smile.

"Hm," Haruka affirmed.

"Would you mind playing something for me while we wait for the guitar?"

"Any requests?" he asked as he climbed the steps of the podium, walking past the piano.

Unconsciously Makoto followed him up as he thought about his answer. "Something you like to play," he decided, because he was interested in knowing every last part of Haruka, even down to what pieces he liked to play.

"Alright," Haruka murmured, his beautiful eyes telling Makoto that he already knew exactly what he was going to play. He walked past a violin to grab another one, the action bringing an amused smile to Makoto's face for it seemed like something that was very befitting of Haruka.

With a gesture of his hand Haruka invited Makoto to sit down in one of the chairs and he did, looking up at Haruka in anticipation. Gracefully he lifted the violin to his chin and he raised the bow to the strings, beginning to play.

The sound of music filled the air, the tune lighting a flame of recognition inside of Makoto and capturing him, making him unable to look away from Haruka. From the way his delicate fingers moved at the violin's neck, to the deftly movements of his arm and the concentrated yet stoic expression that was written across his face, everything about Haruka was simply enchanting. Like the music he was making had caught Makoto in a spell that was too beautiful and powerful to be broken by a mere human like himself. But he didn't want to break it; he didn't mind being entranced by Haruka's beauty and talent. On the contrary, he would have loved to stay captivated by Haruka for the rest of his life and he would die happily. With simply his breathtaking presence and a stroke of his bow across the violin's strings, Haruka managed to control him and Makoto couldn't do anything but watch and listen in awe, completely at his mercy.

When the last notes died out, Makoto was taken back to earth. He applauded softly in appreciation and admiration. "That was beautiful, Haru," he complimented, genuinely impressed with Haruka's abilities. It seemed like Haruka was simply perfect at everything he tried his hand at, be it swimming, cooking, painting, and apparently playing violin too. Admittedly, Makoto was not the hardest person to impress and the feelings that had crept up to his heart and dominated his thoughts might have influenced him and make his opinion not without bias. But what did that matter when the man standing in front of him was beautiful in every sense of the word?

"Thank you," Haruka murmured with a small nod of gratitude before he set the violin back down in its stand.

"I don't have as much knowledge of music as I probably should have," Makoto confessed, "but that sounded really familiar."

"Danse Macabre," Haruka revealed with a small smile, "It's not the same as the fully orchestrated version but the first violin is distinct enough for immediate recognition."

The sight of the corners of those alluring lips curling upwards made Makoto's own mouth smile as well. "Like I said, I don't really have any knowledge of music, but that piece sounds really difficult. I'm surprised you could do it without the sheet music."

Haruka merely shrugged, as if to say that it wasn't that hard at all. "It's my favourite piece," he said,
explaining how he knew it by heart. "It's what made me decide to learn how to play violin."

"Really?" Makoto questioned, his tone indicating that he was interested in hearing the rest of this story.

"Hm," Haruka hummed, leaning against the piano, "After I was taught to play piano, my parents wanted me to learn to play a second instrument. I didn't know which one to pick since I wasn't particularly interested in learning any of them anyway. But then my grandmother took me to an orchestral performance and to be quite honest, I was bored. The music was nice, but it didn't interest me at all, because every piece just sounded the same to me. Of course, my grandmother noticed my disinterest and she began to tell me about the pieces, about their origin and composers and what she liked and disliked about them. And then they played Danse Macabre and it was the first piece to intrigue me, because it sounded different from all others. Grandmother explained what the piece was about and while I listened to it, I could visualise the scene in my head. When she told me that it was one of her favourite pieces, mainly because of the way the violin was used, I knew what I wanted to play."

The smile that had been on Makoto's face softened with fondness. "You learned to play it so you could play the violin parts of Danse Macabre for her?"

Haruka nodded before the small smile that stretched his lips turned melancholic, presumably in memory of his late grandmother. "Pretty ironic, huh?"

"Not at all," Makoto said earnestly, "I think it's very sweet." When Haruka raised his thin eyebrows in a look of surprise, Makoto continued, "Thank you for playing it for me."

Those sincere words brought a rosy flush to Haruka's cheeks, complimenting the beautiful blue of his eyes. Seeing him all flustered was so cute and it made Makoto's heart thump faster. No matter how often he saw Haruka, he doubted he would ever tire of the sight of him, whether he maintained his stoic demeanour or if it was broken by an unusual rush of emotion, for every part of him was just as gorgeous as the next.

It was ridiculous how easily his thoughts were able to drift off lately and he really needed to get a grip before he said or did something he'd regret later.

The charged atmosphere that had lingered was broken by a few sharp knocks on the door before it was swung open, revealing Sir Minami standing at the threshold. In his hand he held up a guitar. "Your Highness," he called, "Found it!"

Knowing that this was his cue, Makoto got up from the chair and descended the steps of the podium, jogging lightly over to the door. "Thank you," he said as he accepted the guitar, "I hope it wasn't too much trouble."

"Of course it wasn't, Your Highness," Sir Minami assured, "I hope this one's alright…?"

"It is! Thank you."

In acknowledgement to Makoto's gratitude, Sir Minami nodded with a kind smile. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No," Makoto uttered before he looked back at Haruka, who had seated himself in the chair that Makoto previously occupied in the meanwhile. "Haru?"

"No, everything is fine," Haruka stated, his smooth voice ringing through the large room.
"Do you wish to continue with the activities as planned?"

"Yes."

"Alright. The others will be here in approximately 40 minutes," Sir Minami informed and Haruka nodded in confirmation. "Then, please excuse me."

"Thank you," Haruka muttered before Sir Minami left the room, closing the door behind himself. With the guitar in hand and a gentle smile on his face, Makoto walked back over to Haruka. "I suppose it's my turn now."

"I suppose it is," Haruka said, the amusement in his voice betraying his anticipation.

Makoto chuckled lightly as he came to a halt on the podium, experimentally running his fingers over the guitar's strings to test what they sounded like. Displeased by what he heard, he mumbled under his breath, "Wait, let me just..." and he sat down in the chair next to Haruka's, focusing his attention on the pegs. It was obvious that it hadn't been used for quite some time. When he realised that he hadn't finished his sentence, he looked up and smiled sheepishly at Haruka. "Sorry, I have to tune it first."

"It's alright, take your time," Haruka spoke softly, patiently.

"Thanks," Makoto responded, grateful of Haruka's understanding. He twisted the tuning pegs and plucked at the strings until he was content with what he heard. It was obviously not his own guitar and he wasn't quite sure if every guitar was the same since he had never played a different one before, but he would have to make do with this one because it was all he had. He wanted to sing for Haruka and he wasn't about to do it a capella after all the trouble Sir Minami went through to find him this guitar. It may not sound exactly the same as he was used to, but surely Haruka would understand that since he clearly had a preference when it came to the violins this palace possessed. "Alright," he sighed when he was done and he got up.

"Whenever you're ready."

Makoto doubted if his audience had ever been this small before, but that didn't stop the nerves from coiling inside his stomach and making his palms sweaty around the neck and body of the guitar. After all, he had never wanted to impress a single person as dearly as he did now. In order to calm himself, he took a deep breath. Haruka had shown him so many of his talents already so it was only fair that he showed him what he could do as well. There was no reason to be nervous, because this was Haruka, and even if Haruka's overall perfection and magnificence was impossible to match up to and equate, he felt comfortable with him like he did with no other. He could do this. Like Haruka, Makoto didn't have to think about which song he was going to play and sing either. So he took another deep breath, put the strap around his neck and began.

In a way, this was the song that started it all; the song that had led Nagisa over to the town's square, that caused for the collision of two completely separate worlds. The memory of the day he met Nagisa and Rei felt like real centuries ago, even if it hadn't even been two weeks since then. If he hadn't been singing and playing this song at that exact time on that one fateful day, he doubted he would even be here, standing in front of the Prince of Iwatobi who was coincidentally the most beautiful and interesting individual he had ever seen and met.

For a brief moment there were speculations of Nagisa's current whereabouts, but they soon vanished again when he looked over at Haruka and saw his large blue eyes filled with wonder and
his tiny mouth opened slightly in what Makoto's heart dearly wished to interpret as amazement. Much like he himself had been before, Haruka appeared to be entranced by the music that he strummed out of the guitar but mainly by his voice, that resonated through the massive room.

The thought that there was a chance that he could captivate Haruka with his singing sent a shiver down his spine and brought a surge of warmth to his chest. Makoto knew that he could sing well; he wouldn't put himself out there on the street if he couldn't and he wouldn't have earned what he had otherwise. But that didn't mean that Haruka had to like it, per se. People had different tastes after all and especially someone like Haruka who had probably heard all that musicians had to offer surely wouldn't be impressed by a silly little street musician like himself. That was what he had braced himself for, but if he had truly learned to read the expressions that were written across Haruka's face, then none of those earlier predictions were true. It might be wishful thinking on Makoto's part again, but Haruka truly seemed impressed. And perhaps some of that might be not because of the way his voice sounded, but because it was his voice.

While all these thoughts and feelings coursed through his mind and body, Makoto continued to sing. He had sung this song so often that he didn't even need to think about the lyrics; they came flowing out of him with practiced ease, his vocal cords vibrating with muscle memory. With an enamored smile breaking through, Makoto finished the song and strummed out the last couple of notes, that echoed through the room before it became quiet again.

This would usually be the moment loud applause sounded out and, depending on the crowd, some cheers while some coins were thrown in his cup. He would bow in appreciation and mutter an expression of gratitude to those who could spare a few coins and enjoyed his performance enough to reward them to him. But that didn't happen now, it stayed silent save for one tiny gasp: the sound of a small yet sharp intake of breath that had slipped from Haruka's mouth without his awareness or permission. It was honestly the greatest compliment he had ever received.

Makoto could see Haruka's inner turmoil as he was unable to find the words he needed to react.

"That was… beautiful," he sighed in lack of better words to express himself. "I've never heard that song before."

At that Makoto's smile widened, not surprised in the slightest. "It's a song of my people," he explained, hoping that Haruka thought he meant 'the people of my realm' rather than 'the folk like me'. "My mother taught it to me when I was younger."

"Did she teach you how to play guitar too?"

"No, I taught myself," Makoto said truthfully before he realised that that didn't sound very believable so he added, "I mean, I got lessons but I mostly learned on my own."

Haruka nodded as if he understood as he got up and walked over to the piano and sat down on the seat. "How did it go?" he wondered as he laid his fingers on the keys, played a couple of notes that sounded similar to the melody of the song and sang a few words of the chorus.

It really should have been a given, but that beautiful voice could sing well too. Even though it had only been a light breath, a small whisper of words, it made Makoto's heart beat out of his chest, the butterflies that had taken residence inside of his belly fluttering around like crazy, as if every moment spent with Haruka was driving them further into insanity. With every new thing he discovered about Haruka, his list of things he admired about him grew and Makoto was absolutely certain that there were no negative facets to Haruka and that he was simply the epitome of perfection.
"That's it!" Makoto exclaimed enthusiastically and he put the guitar down on a chair so he could go over to Haruka and watch him play and hopefully to hear him sing some more too. "I'm surprised you were able to get that without the sheet music and from the sound of it alone!"

"It's nothing," Haruka brushed off with a shrug, "I don't like sheet music anyway." When Makoto looked at him with a questioning gaze, he elaborated, "I can read it, I just prefer to play without it. To play what feels right rather than let it be dictated by instructions."

The smile that permanently etched itself onto Makoto's face when he was blessed with Haruka's presence softened with fondness. "That's very like you, Haru," he said gently, his voice coated with undiluted affection. He could only imagine the exasperation of his piano teachers at his free-spirited mindset, but Makoto thought that it was truly adorable. "You're so amazing, Haru. I would never be able to do something like that."

"Of course you can," Haruka stated and he scooted over to one side of the seat, gesturing for Makoto to sit down beside him, so he did.

The seat was definitely not made to accommodate two people so their thighs pressed together intimately. It brought warmth to Makoto's cheeks and he turned his head to look at Haruka's face, that was incredibly close. His eyelashes were thick and long, fanning against his cheekbones whenever he blinked and his eyes were so impossibly blue that Makoto felt like he was drowning again. But then Makoto's gaze fell onto those pink lips that were slightly parted. Never before had they looked this inviting and unconsciously Makoto leaned in.

He snapped out of it when Haruka turned his head away and embarrassment filled Makoto's senses, but Haruka's mind was elsewhere and he seemingly hadn't even noticed Makoto's drifting attention. A tender smile stretched his lips as he splayed out his fingers of his left hand over the keys, and with his right hand he grabbed Makoto's left hand as well, placing it on top of his own, giving Makoto's blazing cheeks not even a second to cool down. Then Haruka put his right hand on the keys as well and the look that he gave Makoto told him that he should do the same as with the other hand.

Having forgotten what they had previously been doing for his mind was mainly occupied with wonders of what Haruka's lips tasted like and how they would feel against his own, Makoto did what Haruka silently asked of him but did so with confusion. Even if he didn't know what exactly it was that Haruka planned on doing, Makoto didn't mind this, not at all; any excuse to touch Haruka's hands was a good one and his skin was so incredibly soft that it made him want to grasp them to hold on to them forever. But that was probably not what Haruka intended to do, no matter how dearly Makoto wanted that to be it.

His questions were answered when Haruka began to play again and Makoto could feel his agile fingers under his, his muscles moving beneath his skin, completely covered by Makoto's larger ones.

"See, you can play too," Haruka said with a smile and Makoto chuckled, remembering what they were talking about and what Haruka was therefore doing. Since the size difference of their hands was quite significant, it was easy to create the illusion that Makoto was playing, though it did look a bit odd. "Even without the sheet music."

"But this is kind of cheating, isn't it?" Makoto giggled.

Haruka merely shrugged, "It works the other way around too, if you find that more acceptable." Like he had said, he pulled his hands out from under Makoto's to turn their positions around, so now Haruka's hands were lying atop of his. Haruka's hands were smaller and didn't completely
cover his and there was a clear contrast in their complexions, but Haruka didn't seem to mind either of those things as he lightly pressed against Makoto's fingers with his, making them push down onto the piano's keys. "Now you're the one who's pressing the keys, so technically, you're the one who's playing."

"Now I'm just being controlled by you like a marionette," Makoto objected, though he definitely didn't mind it. "Are you my puppeteer now?" he jokingly asked.

In response Haruka shrugged again. "I can be if you want me to."

At that Makoto couldn't hold in his laughter anymore, both at Haruka's general playfulness and his weird remark. "What does that even mean?"

Upon hearing Makoto's bubbling laughter, Haruka had to chuckle as well. "I don't know," he admitted as he snorted, a youthful smile stretching his face and Makoto hadn't felt this young and carefree in years, so he couldn't do anything but smile back at him, wide and genuine.

When their giggles passed, Haruka cleared his throat in an attempt to regain his composure.

"In all seriousness, I'm sure you would be able to play piano if you tried. You seem very determined and dedicated so I think you could definitely do it if you wanted to," he murmured softly, and when he realised how unusually sentimental his words had been, he quickly continued, "I could teach you, if you want."

Surprised by that offer, Makoto's mind filled with thoughts of spending many afternoons just like this, sitting side by side in the large ballroom with soft palms and delicate fingertips guiding his hands over the black and white keys to fill the air around them with the most beautiful melodies. The mere thought of such intimacy made his skin prickle and his heart sing. "I'd like that a lot."

"Alright. I'm not a piano teacher though, so if you prefer being taught by a professional, I can hire a proper teacher," Haruka suggested but Makoto immediately shook his head.

"I wouldn't want to be taught by anyone but you."

It was Haruka's turn to be surprised by Makoto's sincere words, and he smiled softly down at their hands. "Alright."

Even though Haruka's offer to hire a piano teacher for him had been a genuine one and he was sure that if he had expressed his preference for that then Haruka would have done what he proposed, it was obvious in every little mannerism that he'd rather be the one to teach him as well. And because Haruka seemed to be someone who generally didn't go out of his way or put effort into teaching others things like this, especially since he wasn't a professional and didn't really have much time to spare as it was, the fact that he proposed to do this for him told Makoto that it was just an excuse for them to spent more time together. Perhaps the same images and expectations that Makoto had were in Haruka's head as well. Just the possibility of it made Makoto's stomach flutter with anticipation for a time that would never come.

For a moment they sat in silence as neither of them really knew what to do from this point on, the air heavy with unvoiced emotion. To Makoto's astonishment, Haruka didn't remove his hands from where they laid on top of his, his warm and soft palms providing a pleasant pressure. There was nothing that Makoto wanted more at that moment than to turn his hands around so he could slip his fingers between Haruka's, but he didn't dare to. Fear of potential rejection, of crossing Haruka's boundaries and making him uncomfortable held him back. Even if his smitten mind had somewhat successfully convinced him that his interest was mutual, for that was definitely the impression that
Haruka gave him, he didn't want to risk breaking the agonisingly wonderful tension that had settled between them.

Slowly but surely their eyes met, getting lost in trying to decipher the intentions that were thinly veiled by hesitance, but were somehow conveyed by a gaze that connected them; like a beautiful lake in the middle of a gorgeous forest, two separate entities that intertwined inevitably, coming together to form a stunning scenery that would lack with the other's absence.

Haruka was the one to shy away first, turning his face as the pretty blush that Makoto had quickly come to adore lit up his cheeks; a sunrise that was a magnificent addition to the landscape of their hearts. It was only this gesture that made Makoto snap out of it, for he could never be the first one to look away since Haruka's eyes never failed to capture him with every fleeting glance. Normally he would be a little embarrassed for staring, but it was hard to feel it when Haruka's response was so endearing.

His eyes fell on their hands once more, for he knew that that was where Haruka's gaze rested too. Knowing that there was no excuse to keep his hands in place for his point had long since been made, Haruka slowly dragged his fingers over the back of Makoto's hands simply to prolong their touch for just a little while. The feather-light sensation was rather ticklish, yet gentle and tender. Not only did it make the skin beneath Haruka's soft fingertips tingle, it ignited a spark that sent shivers through his entire body like a small whisper in his ear.

When Haruka's skin had left his entirely, he quickly withdrew his arms and folded his hands in his lap, like he wanted to prevent himself from getting persuaded to reach out again. With a small cough he cleared his throat in order to collect himself, or so Makoto had learned he did in the time they spent together.

"But in return," Haruka continued as if their conversation had never ended, "I want you to teach me that song."

Whether it was because the song held significance to Makoto or just because Haruka had liked it, Makoto didn't know, but this request made him feel giddy inside. "Deal," he chuckled, and his agreement brought a smile to Haruka's face as well. "So when do you want to start? Right now?"

Haruka opened his mouth to answer but was ultimately interrupted by firm knocks on the door. His face fell with a sliver of disappointment but it was gone as quickly as it had come and was replaced with a tiny spark of what Makoto guessed to be excitement.

Remembering that Haruka had asked the servants to come here, Makoto knew that Haruka had actually planned something different for this afternoon than learning a song of Makoto's folk. "Maybe later?" he suggested, the kind tone of his voice indicating that it was something they could put on hold for now but definitely continue in the future if Haruka wished to do so.

These words halted his contemplation and an appreciative smile softened his features. "Yeah," he murmured before he called out, "Come in."

The doors swung open and closed after a little over a dozen servants entered the room and Haruka walked off the podium, meeting them halfway and without realising it, Makoto followed him down.

"Thank you for wanting to play for us," Haruka said in addressing to all of them.

"Of course, Your Highness," one woman responded clearly and the rest muttered similar answers, "Any requests?"
Pursing his lips in thought, Haruka pondered for a second before he suggested, "Waltz of the Flowers?"

The servants nodded to show that they would comply before they climbed up the steps and settled themselves in their seats and took ahold of their respective instruments, fumbling with the pages of their sheet music to get to the right one.

While they were getting ready to play their instruments, Haruka turned to Makoto again.

"This is okay, right? I mean, it's hardly a full orchestra so the music will sound quite a bit different but…"

"It's fine, Haru," Makoto assured with his trademark smile, "Thank you."

Those words made Haruka smile as well and he grabbed Makoto's hand, bowing at him as he formally asked, "May I have this dance?"

Makoto's heart had already been racing, but at that question it began to beat even faster. There was nothing he wanted more dearly than to dance with Haruka, but there was a small problem - or actually, a quite large problem.

"I- Haru, I-" he stuttered, afraid of making Haruka feel like he was being rejected when he most certainly was not but he didn't quite know what to say. After a second of pondering, he just went with the truth, "I can't dance."

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Haruka stated in a way that was supposed to be reassuring but at that moment it didn't really work.

"No, I mean, I can't dance. As in, I don't know how," Makoto emphasized, quickly trying to come up with an excuse but being unable to find one. He knew he'd had no choice but to tell Haruka the truth because he couldn't fake his way through dancing without it being glaringly obvious he had no idea what he was doing. But unlike with previous struggles, he had no explanation for this one; what kind of prince didn't know how to dance?

"You were never taught?" Haruka questioned in confusion, not letting go of his hand.

"W-Well, they tried to teach me, but I… I always skipped out on the lessons, much to my parents and teachers' dismay, haha," he laughed awkwardly as he tried to fabricate a conclusion to his lies, "After a few failed attempts they decided to just let me off the hook. We didn't hold many balls and the attention was always on my sisters anyway."

This was it, Makoto thought. This is where everything went downhill. There was no way Haruka would buy this absurd story, even he knew better than to believe something like this. He was completely sure that Nagisa knew how to dance and that it was mandatory for members of royal and noble families to learn it.

But Haruka only looked a bit surprised and didn't question him further. Haruka trusted him, enough to believe every nonsensical word that left his mouth, and it made him feel so incredibly guilty for putting his trust to shame. This whole act already made him feel bad enough as it was and while he was glad that Haruka found him trustworthy and that he therefore didn't blow his cover, Makoto didn't know how much more guilt he could stomach before it would become an unbearable burden.

"Oh…" Haruka sighed and even if that probably wasn't his intention, Makoto could hear how disappointed he was. "I guess we'll do something else then."
The dejected tone of his voice made Makoto feel even worse, especially because he did actually want to dance with him. It wasn't odd that Haruka thought that he despised dancing for the core of his story implied that he ran away in detestation, when he truthfully wished for nothing more than that he had been taught how to dance as a child so he wouldn't have to disappoint Haruka - and himself. All of this made him regret not being a real prince; someone who had the skill and knowledge to match up to Haruka and go along with his every whim.

"No!" he protested, his voice being so loud that it startled Haruka, "I mean," he continued in a softer tone, "I want to dance with you. I just… don't know how. So, could you teach me?"

"Oh," Haruka echoed, this time being pleasantly surprised, "Sure, uh…"

The rest of the sentence died out on his tongue and Makoto could practically see the gears turning in his head. Explaining how to dance obviously did not come as easy to Haruka as explaining how to swim - though admittedly, some things he had uttered during his swimming lesson did not completely make sense to Makoto either, but he had found that rather endearing especially since his excitement had been clearly shining through - as he really had to think of where to start. So Makoto smiled patiently at him, letting him know that he could take his time to figure it out.

"Um, I only know how to lead," he mumbled after a minute, "Is that alright?"

"Of course," Makoto beamed with a reassuring smile, "It's going to be my first time so it doesn't matter either way. Besides, I figure following is easier than leading, right?"

"I don't know," Haruka said honestly with a shrug, "Perhaps."

Then the music began to play and with Makoto's hand still in his, Haruka led them away from the podium and further into the large room.

"Alright so," Haruka started, grabbing his other hand as he took a step closer to him and Makoto's heart fluttered at his sudden proximity. He raised their arms as he firmly yet gently held his hand, "Put your other hand right beneath my shoulder."

"Like this?" Makoto lightly put his left hand on Haruka's upper arm like Haruka told him to.

"Yes," Haruka affirmed and he put his own right hand on Makoto's shoulder blade. "Basically, what you have to do is respond to my movements: so if I take a step forward with my right foot, you take a step backward with your left foot. And if I take a step backward then you take a step forward, um…"

Knowing that Haruka was having a hard time explaining, Makoto decided to save him the struggle of finding more words. "Let's just try it, alright?"

"Alright," Haruka murmured with a thankful smile, "We'll take it slowly."

"Sorry in advance if I step on your toes."

"Forgiven in advance," he chuckled, "I'm not exactly the greatest dancer myself so I'm sorry in advance as well."

Makoto laughed softly, "Forgiven in advance as well."

"Ready?"

"Whenever you are."
At Makoto's okay, Haruka counted from three to one before he slowly put his right foot forward, giving Makoto time to respond to his movement. Makoto kept his eyes pointedly focused on their feet, wanting to prevent himself from misstepping and actually stepping on Haruka's toes. Their dance was slow yet it confused him nonetheless; stepping sideways and switching directions were not things that Haruka had mentioned, but Makoto didn't complain about it for he knew Haruka had a hard enough time explaining as it was. So he just let himself be pulled along by Haruka and the pace he had created.

After a little while, Makoto began to recognise a pattern in their steps but he still kept his attention on their every motion. They were dancing out of tune with the music for their movements were far slower than the rhythm of the composition, but Makoto didn't notice it because he was too preoccupied with not tripping over his own feet. Haruka didn't seem to mind it though; he was as patient with him as he always was and Makoto dearly appreciated that.

When the last notes rang out, Haruka came to a halt, naturally stopping Makoto as well.

"How was that?" Haruka wondered, clearly wanting to know his honest opinion.

"It was fun. Difficult, but fun," Makoto said with a warm smile. Even though it was hard, he knew he wanted to learn as quickly as possibly so he could dance a proper waltz with Haruka.

"Try not to look at your feet this time," Haruka advised, "I promise it's easier if you're not too focused on what you're doing. Rather than think, try to feel it."

That advice was so befitting of Haruka that it stretched Makoto's smile, showing his teeth as he giggled a little. "I'll try my best."

"Your Highness?" the same woman from before called out, now holding a flute in her hands. She didn't elaborate on what she meant, but it was clear that she was asking Haruka what composition he wanted to hear next.

"Do you have any requests?" he asked Makoto, who only shook his head.

"You can choose the pieces," he offered, wanting to make sure he sounded like he wanted to please Haruka - while he did want to do that, the main reason had been that he didn't have enough knowledge to propose a waltz, for he truly knew none.

"Okay," Haruka breathed before he stated, "Sobre las Olas, please."

It was quiet for a little while, save for the sound of pages being turned as the servants searched for the one that held the score of Sobre las Olas.

When the music resumed, Haruka stared into his eyes as he began to move again. "Look at me," he reminded, but he truly didn't have to for his enchantingly beautiful eyes had long since captivated Makoto once more.

And like that, it was as if his feet moved on their own. Though they had made joking remarks about it before, it really was as if Haruka was his puppeteer now for his mere gaze had caught Makoto in a spell that controlled his every muscle. There was nothing that he could do except for letting himself be swept along by Haruka's current, like Haruka was guiding him over the waves of music.

Because he was no longer worried about the placement of his feet, he was truly able to feel it, just like Haruka told him to. Suddenly he was extremely aware of the way they held each other: of Haruka's hand on his back, of his own hand beneath Haruka's shoulder, of the gentle touch of his
fingers curled around his and their warm palms pressed together. Although Haruka didn't strike him as someone who was particularly fond of dancing, there was an adorable smile on his pretty face and the look in his stunning eyes emitted nothing but sheer joy.

Could it be that Haruka had wanted to dance with him not because he enjoyed it, but because it was a reason to hold him close? Or did he think that even if dancing was not his favourite activity, he would enjoy it if he danced with him? It might not be either of these things, but the possibility that either, if not both, had been the motive behind Haruka's actions made Makoto's foolish self incredibly happy and he couldn't suppress a wide grin.

From a professional's point of view, their dancing probably looked terrible: their form was off and the rhythm was all over the place, but neither of them cared. All that mattered was that they were together and they were having a really great time as they twirled around the ballroom in each other's arms.

The song was finished far too quickly for Makoto's liking but one look into Haruka's eyes told him that in contrast to the composition, this moment was far from over.

"Do you think we can go a little faster now?" Haruka proposed, the kindness in his tone indicating that it was merely a suggestion and that it by no means had to be accepted by Makoto if he didn't want to do so.

"Yeah," Makoto agreed, feeling confident enough to speed up the pace.

In response Haruka nodded and before the flutist could ask him for his next request, Haruka said, "Voices of Spring."

This time Haruka didn't wait for the music to start up before he resumed their waltz and Makoto giggled at his eagerness, feeling as light as a feather. Although he definitely didn't dislike dancing, Makoto knew for sure that he was enjoying himself as much as he was because Haruka was his partner.

Despite knowing the music was being played by the servants, in this moment Makoto truly felt like Haruka and he were the only two people on the planet. Never before in his life had he set foot on a dance floor but with Haruka leading him, Makoto felt like he had been born to do nothing but follow him. It felt natural to him, and though his skill and appearance definitely disproved this, it seemed so easy. With Haruka pulling his strings, he felt like he could do just about anything and have a lot of fun doing it too.

Almost effortlessly they moved from one end of the room to the other, compatible like they were two bodies in perfect harmony. Like they had been made for the sole purpose of holding and guiding each other.

The afternoon continued like this, just the two of them dancing around the large ballroom in a faux waltz with a makeshift orchestra of maids and lackeys providing the music. If the music inevitably stopped then Haruka would call out another title that didn't sound familiar to Makoto and the music resumed soon thereafter.

Makoto could not remember a single moment in his life in which he felt happier than he was right then. Swaying around the room without a care in the world, in the arms of the kindest and most beautiful person he had ever met. There had been many times in these past few days when he felt like he could die on the spot and live in paradise forevermore, and though he had meant it in every heartbeat, it gained more depth and meaning each time. Every moment beside Haruka was even greater than the next and Makoto wasn't sure how much more he could take before he would
explode for there was simply too much happiness to manage and contain within himself. He just felt so light, like his feet left the floor as he ascended to the heavens on a cloud of warmth and fuzziness.

In hindsight, he was very grateful that Kisumi had gotten him new boots, because his feet definitely wouldn't have survived dancing around for hours in boots that were too small and hurt his toes. And while his feet still hurt a little after carrying his weight for so long without a break, Makoto didn't feel it; all he felt was Haruka's touch and the butterflies that were roaming through his belly.

At one point when the music stopped, Haruka told the servants to just play whatever, no longer caring what they danced to as long as they got to continue. Since Makoto didn't really know many of the compositions either way, he shared this sentiment entirely.

If there had been any trace of seriousness in their waltz before, then it was slowly dissipating as the hours passed and the afternoon progressed. Feeling bold and somewhat playful, Makoto lifted the hand that was in Haruka's and held it up, silently inviting Haruka to spin around and he chuckled as he did.

Slowly Haruka's hold on him began to slacken and his hand drifted from Makoto's upper back to his waist, his palm a gentle and light pressure against the small of his back and their outstretched arms were no longer as taut as they were at the start, their elbows hanging comfortably beside them. Their dance was beginning to lose every bit of form it once had but again, neither of them minded or cared. It may not be a correct waltz any longer, it probably never had been in the first place, but it was correct in Makoto's heart. Because something that felt so right simply couldn't be wrong.

One by one the servants left the room for they had other things they needed to attend to; they needed to set the table for dinner or do the laundry or something similar like that, and Haruka told them to just leave when they had to and that they didn't need to ask permission nor announce their exit. Truthfully he and Makoto didn't even notice their absence or lack of contribution to the music for their minds were completely engulfed with one another.

As the afternoon turned into the evening, the last maid left to attend to other business and it was really just them, alone in the large empty ballroom with only the sound of their own heartbeats and breaths.

Bathed in the orange light of the setting sun that was shining through the windows, they continued to dance. Rather than letting their pace be dictated by music, they were now dancing to the rhythm of their hearts, that were beating as one. Not a word had been spoken to each other for hours but the silence that had since then settled in the air between the two of them was a comfortable one that didn't require to be disrupted by verbal affirmations; they were content just the way they were.

In a slow and gentle movement, Haruka leaned his head against Makoto's shoulder. A smile of endearment softened Makoto's features as he tightened his arm around Haruka's back, holding him even closer than before. Simultaneously they sighed, feeling happy and at ease in the arms of someone they met just the day before yesterday, yet had grown close to in a way they never had with anyone else before.

Almost naturally, their roles reversed; as Haruka rested his head against Makoto's shoulder, he shifted his weight and allowed Makoto to take charge. Slowly stepping around in circles could hardly be called dancing, let alone leading, but what did it matter when that was what they both wanted?

Makoto's eyes fell close as he leaned his cheek against Haruka's head, truly wanting to experience
and feel this moment with every fiber of his being. Haruka's hair smelled so nice and Makoto was
overcome with the desire to bury his nose between the strands and press tiny kisses against his
scalp. Despite their current position and the fact that Haruka was the one who closed the distance
between their bodies first, Makoto wasn't completely sure if he would be comfortable with
something like that yet. Never wanting to make him feel anything but happy and safe, Makoto held
himself back. He wouldn't want to break this magical moment anyway.

Since the music had long since stopped, Makoto began to hum a soft melody, which also helped to
distract himself from any wandering thoughts. Rather than think, try to feel it, Haruka had told him
and oh, did he feel.

It was strange how the mere thought of holding Haruka like this would have been enough to make
him blush and make his knees go weak with nervousness yesterday, yet now, a little over twenty-
four hours later, he felt calm and at ease, filled with feelings of bliss and rightness. But then again,
it wasn't that odd because it felt like centuries had passed since then in terms of their connection.

It seemed like Makoto wasn't the only one who was feeling things he had never felt before; Haruka
sighed once more in contentment as he softly rubbed his cheek against Makoto's shoulder, most
likely feeling the vibrations of his chest while he hummed. In a need to return Haruka's subtle
display of affection Makoto gently stroked his thumb over the back of Haruka's hand. He didn't so
much see the cute smile that stretched Haruka's lips as he felt it.

Eventually they came to a halt, standing still for the first time in hours. Even if he never wanted to
let Haruka go again, he knew they couldn't keep dancing for the rest of eternity; the sun had almost
disappeared behind the horizon so surely it wouldn't be long until they were called for dinner.
Perhaps Haruka still wanted to freshen himself up before that, so the time for this moment to end
had most likely come. Time really does fly when you're having fun.

Without a word Haruka got the message and straightened his back, removing his face from where it
had been cuddled into Makoto's body, though his grip around Makoto's waist remained. As Makoto
let Haruka's hand slip away from his, he was surprised to feel his other arm wrap around him to
join the other. So naturally, Makoto's free arm wound itself around Haruka, seeking to return his
embrace.

Haruka looked up at him, and his beautiful eyes had never seemed this large before and his long
and dark lashes only accentuated the deep blue. There was a strand of his hair that was tousled
from where it had rubbed against Makoto's clothing and without thinking, he reached up to flatten
it against his head again and he brushed it behind his ear. Haruka stared into his eyes like he was
searching for something, some kind of approval or permission. When he ultimately found it,
Makoto could see his eyes fluttering shut before he felt him stand up on his tippy toes and he
leaned down to meet him halfway.

But then there were a few sharp knocks on the door and they jumped away from each other like
they had been burned by the other's touch and bright blushes lit up their faces. Rather than being
afraid of getting caught, it had startled them; it had broken the spell that they had captivated each
other in at the beginning of this afternoon - or really, from the first moment they laid eyes upon
each other.

Trying his best to regain some form of composure, Haruka smoothed over his clothing in fear of
looking dishevelled before he coughed lightly. He most likely didn't trust his voice not to crack
after he hadn't spoken for quite some time and was filled with a whirlwind of unknown feelings, or
so Makoto presumed.

"Yes?"
Like Makoto had predicted, the door was opened by a lackey who announced, "Your Highness, dinner is being served."

"We'll be there in a minute," Haruka said with a nod, having successfully recovered his stoic expression. "Thank you."

As soon as the door closed again his demeanour immediately crumbled, melting away like snow in daylight. Bashfully he pointed his gaze towards their feet. It was honestly adorable, especially since he had been the one who told Makoto not to look at their feet hours earlier and even if the circumstances had been different, Makoto knew it was because he was afraid to feel. Although the sight of Haruka being shy and a little self-conscious was quite endearing, it would be cruel to make him suffer from his own embarrassment longer when there was no reason for him to be embarrassed in the first place.

Makoto put his hand over his heart and his other arm against his lower back and bowed to Haruka the way he had when they first met, just how Rei taught him to. "Thank you for dancing with me," he thanked solemnly before he stood back up and smiled at Haruka, "I had a lot of fun, Haru."

Haruka's eyebrows raised in a look of surprise before he chuckled softly, trying to cover his mouth with his hand. "I had a lot of fun too," he murmured as he lowered his hand again, a cute smile stretching his pretty lips, "Thank you." He finished with a bow of his own, his eyes twinkling with joy.

Glad to see that he was no longer embarrassed, Makoto giggled before he tried to assume a serious demeanour, yet failing since he simply couldn't repress his wide smile. "Now, would you like to accompany me for dinner?" he inquired, holding out his arm in invitation.

"It would be an honour," Haruka nodded, grinning at their mock-formality as he accepted Makoto's arm and lightly grabbed onto it. Even if it was most likely expected of them to be formal as a form of politeness to one another since they hadn't known each other for long yet, they both felt more comfortable with dropping formalities because it portrayed some type of emotional distance that they had far since crossed.

With the touch of a hand on an arm connecting them, they left the room to attend to dinner, a soft smile gracing both of their faces.

By the time dinner was over, the moon had long since come out, illuminating the night sky and shining down on the land. Though that usually meant that it was time for bed for Makoto since another long day of work would start at sunrise, he didn't feel tired at all right then for the adrenaline his excitement provided was doing a great job at keeping him awake and buzzing with energy.

Once they had eaten their fill, Haruka asked him if he would like to take another stroll around the gardens with him, and Makoto would have been downright foolish to refuse an offer as lovely as that one.

The gardens of the palace of Iwatobi were massive and covered a large patch of ground, probably even more than the palace itself, Makoto dared to guess. It seemed like the parts that he had already seen when they walked around here before were only a fraction of the entire thing and that baffled Makoto; they had stayed closer to the edge of the garden yesterday so they would easily get
to the gate so it wasn't strange that he hadn't seen much then, but on the first day they had strolled for about an hour so he had assumed that he had seen most there was to these gardens. But he had been wrong. Truthfully, these gardens were like a maze and Makoto could have easily gotten lost here on his own, which is why he was so grateful and glad that Haruka was here with him, since he seemingly knew these gardens like the back of his hand - that was only one of the many reasons why he was grateful and glad for Haruka's company, though.

"These gardens are much larger than I initially expected," Makoto confessed.

"They are quite large," Haruka affirmed with a fond smile, "They were my grandmother's pride and joy. She loved flowers and plants in general so she would spend a lot of time here. She used to take care of a fair portion of the garden herself until she got too old to keep up. A lot of what you see is here thanks to her."

"She really had an eye for it. It's so beautiful," Makoto complimented, letting his eyes wander around. The light that was coming from the moon and from the lanterns that were beside the pathways lit up the area, revealing the orderly garden that was filled with all different kinds of colourful flowers - some of which Makoto had never even seen before - bushes with roses and rhododendrons, and other plants that he didn't know the name of. There were shrubs trimmed in the shapes of dolphins and trees with low-hanging branches over some parts of the pathway. Here and there stood an iron bench to admire the handiwork of the gardeners and Makoto had even seen some fountains. All in all this place was absolutely beautiful and the fireflies that were fluttering around and about had a certain kind of charm that only added to the magical atmosphere.

"She did, and I'm sure she would appreciate you saying that," Haruka said as he looked around them as well, "What I like about these gardens is that they look different during the day and at night. The way that different kinds of light hit them really gives a different feeling to them. The flowers look better during the day when the sun is out, but I really like the ambience at night too."

"That's really interesting," Makoto honestly thought, "Will you show me them during the day too sometime?"

"If you want me to, of course," Haruka agreed and Makoto was already looking forward to that. But first, he had to witness and appreciate the wonderful sight of the gardens when the sky was dark and lit up by bright stars.

"Did she talk to you a lot about flowers?" he asked to get the conversation back on topic, being curious and having gathered as much because of the nostalgic look in Haruka's eyes and the previous conversations they had about former Queen Nanase.

Haruka nodded. "She taught me everything I know about flora."

"Do you garden as well?"

"I used to, a little," he revealed, "Back when I was little and my grandmother would take care of the plants, she would always ask if I wanted to help her. I'm sure an unknowing child's help did not have much added value, but I always enjoyed it and I think she did, too."

"I'm sure she did," Makoto muttered. Even if he hadn't known Queen Nanase himself, she seemed like a very loving grandmother who was fond of her grandson and Haruka's stories gave him a feeling of unconditional affection that he never got from the king and current queen - though again, he didn't know them very well so it was unfair of him to judge, but that was the impression Haruka gave him of his parents as well. The mental image of a younger version of Haruka doing his best to help his grandmother take care of the violets and poppies was so incredibly endearing that it
brought a smile to Makoto's face, so surely the heart of Haruka's grandmother must have melted at the sight of her adorable grandson as well.

"If you can call that gardening, then I suppose I did," Haruka concluded with a snort. "Why, did it seem like something I would be good at?"

Makoto laughed at Haruka's joking mockery. "Actually, yes it does."

"I told you my parents valued multifaceted staff," Haruka stated with a badly suppressed expression of amusement, "Not a multifaceted son."

"Well, they have both," Makoto responded in earnest, "Multifaceted staff for a multifaceted prince."

At that Haruka actually snickered, yet the light that shone on his face revealed a hint of a blush at Makoto's flattering words. "Thanks, but not really," he brushed off, "Grandma was the one with the green thumb, not me. She taught me a lot, but I didn't take over her work. Flowers and plants require a lot of time and attention, and since I'm currently not in the position to provide either, it's best to just leave them to the care of the gardeners. Luckily my grandmother taught them a lot too and they still do things the same way she used to in her memory, and I'm really glad about that."

"But?" Makoto questioned, knowing that there was more to it than that despite the respectfulness of the staff based on the somewhat melancholic look in his eyes.

"It just feels a bit different," Haruka shrugged and even if he didn't elaborate, Makoto still understood what he meant; it was different because his grandmother enjoyed working in the gardens and always put her love into it, and while the gardeners may enjoy it too, it was still different for they did it because it was their job and not out of genuine interest and care. That's why, to Haruka, the flowers that bloomed lacked the warmth of a loving touch.

"Maybe one day, when you're old and things have calmed down after stepping down from the throne, you can continue her legacy," Makoto proposed with an understanding smile, "Take care of the garden and return her touch."

Haruka smiled softly at his suggestion that was meant to bid some comfort. "Will you be there to assist me?"

Those words held a deeper meaning that was as clear as water to Makoto. The thought of walking through these very gardens fifty years from now with Haruka, who had since then acquired some wrinkles and grey hair yet never lost his handsomeness and charm, brought a surge of longing to his chest and he mirrored Haruka's smile. "If you want me to. I'm not sure if I would be the most valuable asset, but if you want me to, then definitely."

Makoto had implied more with his words as well than what he had said, but Haruka didn't have any trouble catching what was beneath the surface either. "I think you would be a very valuable asset."

Even if the sceptical part of Makoto wondered if he had actually meant it or if it was merely a flirtatious comment that fit the conversation, it made Makoto incredibly happy nonetheless. His intuition told him that Haruka wouldn't say something like that if he didn't truly mean it, and in this case Makoto decided to side with his feelings rather than his rationality and pessimism.

"So, do you like flowers?" Haruka then asked in an attempt to steer the conversation back to a little more light-hearted topic.

"I do," Makoto confirmed with a wide smile, "I've always thought they were very pretty, but
unfortunately I'm not very educated on flora either."

Haruka chuckled, "I think most people aren't; I probably wouldn't be either if it weren't for my grandmother. But despite that, do you have a favourite?"

"Not really, I think all flowers are pretty in their own way," Makoto said as he pondered, "It's a little cliché, but I really like roses. So if I had to pick a favourite, it would be roses, I think."

"That is a little cliché," Haruka stated, the smile that was present on his handsome face betraying his amusement. "But there's nothing wrong with being a little cliché; roses are pretty so it's not surprising that they're one of the most commonly known flowers."

Makoto couldn't help but smile as well. "What are yours?"

"I don't think I have one either," Haruka admitted with a shrug, "There are a lot of pretty flowers. I like roses too. And hydrangeas. I guess I'd pick those, if I had to choose."

"Those are really pretty too," Makoto commented, "And your grandmother? Did she have a favourite?"

"She loved all kinds of flowers too," Haruka informed, giggling softly, "but I remember her being especially fond of tulips, camellias and orange blossoms."

"That's quite unusual. Orange blossoms, I mean."

"She really liked the meaning behind them," he explained, "Apparently they stand for eternal love."

"Wow, I didn't know that. That's really beautiful," Makoto sighed in amazement, and while he had never really given orange blossoms a second thought before, they were suddenly so much more meaningful and beautiful to him. "Did she teach you the meaning of more flowers?"

"She did," Haruka confirmed and he began to tell him about the meanings of the flowers they just talked about. Makoto listened intently, asking questions and sighing in awe and as they strolled through the depths of the garden, Haruka pointed out the plants and flowers that Makoto didn't know and told him about them. Even if the sight of them was not the same as it was during the day, Makoto felt like he was living in a fairytale, walking through the enchanting gardens with a prince most charming.

As silence fell between them after a little while, their shoulders occasionally bumped, sending sparks throughout Makoto's body. There was nothing Makoto wanted more badly than to grab ahold of Haruka's delicate hand and intertwine their fingers, but he had promised himself that he would always wait for Haruka to take the first step. The last thing he wanted was to do something that would make Haruka uncomfortable, and since he wanted Haruka to feel safe and secure around him, he would never even consider crossing Haruka's boundaries so he held himself back. It seemed like the courteous thing to do.

But he didn't have to wait for long until he felt a light brush of fingertips against his hand. It was a shy touch at first, like he was waiting for Makoto to pull away, but slowly Haruka slipped his slim fingers between his. In response Makoto tightened his grip and gave Haruka's hand a gentle squeeze, wordlessly conveying that his desire was mutual. A tender smile stretched his lips and he looked over at Haruka, whose lips curled up into a small and content smile as well. There was no longer the need to find an excuse; the only reason they needed was that it felt right to hold each other's hand and that it made them both incredibly happy. Their hands fit together as perfectly as they always had and Makoto never wanted to let him go again. The soft squeeze that he got in
return told him that their hearts were on the same wavelength, beating as one.

Eventually Haruka led them to a part of the garden that was a little more secluded by a large hedge that surrounded the area. A small gazebo stood in front of a field of red tulips, ivy grew around the white pillars and in the middle on four chains hung a white wooden bench above the ground. It looked like a scenery straight from a picture book, like it was supposed to be in the midst of an abandoned forest waiting to be discovered.

"This was my grandmother's favourite spot," Haruka said and in those expressive eyes Makoto read his reminiscence; all of the precious afternoons spent right here with her when he was younger.

"Thank you for bringing me here, Haru," Makoto murmured, sincerely being glad that Haruka wanted to share this gorgeous place that held so much significance with him.

An appreciative smile appeared on Haruka's face, knowing that he didn't need any more words to explain himself for Makoto to understand. "Would you like to sit down for a little while?"

"Yes."

Without letting go of his hand, Haruka walked up the two steps, naturally pulling Makoto along with him. He sat down on the hanging seat and Makoto followed suit, sitting down on Haruka's right side. It was a lot sturdier than it initially seemed, Makoto concluded thankfully.

The gazebo was made just so that one could still look at parts of the sky while sitting on the bench, and silence fell between them once more as they gazed into the night. The moon wasn't visible from this place but there were countless of stars that shone brightly. All of this made everything seem even more magical to Makoto and he was quite sure that he was dreaming. He didn't pinch himself to confirm it though, because he never wanted to wake up again.

But as the seconds ticked by, the weight of Haruka's hand in his felt more and more real and he happily concluded that he was not dreaming at all, for the mere feeling was better than he ever could have imagined. The more he really thought about it, the heavier the sentiment pressed onto his heart and he had never felt as much as he did at that moment. Although he told himself that he would always wait for Haruka to make the first move, it was like the weight of his emotions forced all of his thoughts and feelings out of him.

"You know, Haru," he started and Haruka looked over at him with a questioning look that encouraged him to go on. "I've had a lot of fun these past few days. Spending time with you makes me really happy, happier than I've ever felt before. Being with you makes me feel comfortable and young and just so happy; it's like time just flies by when I'm with you yet it also stands still and I... I can't really explain it but I've never felt anything like this before. I know that hasn't been long since we first met but it just feels like I've known you forever and-" When Makoto realised he was rambling, he abruptly shut his mouth as he tried to get his thoughts straight, wanting to find a conclusion and get to the point. "I guess, what I'm trying to say is I... I like you, Haru. I really, really like you."

With that confession off his chest, Makoto turned his face away from Haruka, staring at his lap. His heart was pounding against his ribcage and his cheeks felt warmer than they ever had. He had actually gone and voiced the feelings that had been progressively building up inside of him since the moment he first saw Haruka. It hadn't been his intention, but they were so intense that they overflowed in his heart and he simply couldn't let them go unspoken for any longer.

It felt like a century had passed and Haruka still hadn't responded to his words. Afraid that he had said something wrong in his wave of emotion, he didn't dare to look up at him and his blood was
rushing in his ears with how fiercely his heart was beating, causing him to miss the tiny gasp of surprise that had slipped past Haruka's lips without his permission. But Haruka didn't let go of his hand, and he reasoned that he would have pulled away by now if he had somehow been offended by Makoto's rushed yet heartfelt confession.

Not being able to take it any longer for the accumulated tension was too much to handle, Makoto raised his head and looked back at Haruka. His blue eyes were as large as saucers and his pretty mouth was open ever so slightly, like he was still processing Makoto's words. Slowly what Makoto had told seemed to get through to him and then suddenly, like a switch being flipped, his cheeks lit up brightly and he averted his head as well.

Makoto wasn't quite sure what to make of this reaction, but considering that his fingers remained to be laced with his own, he wasn't too worried anymore.

"I…" Haruka began and he turned his head back, staring into Makoto's eyes as he murmured, "I like you too. A lot."

When Haruka's words sank in, an impossibly wide smile appeared on Makoto's face before it softened as he sighed, "Haru."

In response Haruka smiled as well and with his free hand he cupped Makoto's cheek. The smiles soon faded away as their gazes held each other, both being unable to look away from the other's breathtaking eyes as the air between them was charged with tension that had hung between them since day one yet had never been so intense before. Almost naturally, their faces were drawn to each other and their eyes fluttered shut as their lips met.

The kiss was small and shy and only lasted for a second before they pulled back to look at each other once more. In Haruka's eyes Makoto read the same desire that he felt burning in his heart, that was practically beating out of his chest and there was not a sliver of doubt left inside of him. So he parted his lips and tilted his head ever so slightly before he closed the distance between them again.

Haruka kissed him back without hesitance. His lips were so incredibly soft and they felt so good against Makoto's own that his brain short-circuited. Just like this afternoon, he had absolutely no idea what he was doing and yet his body seemed to move on its own, his lips brushing over Haruka's thinner ones like they had been made for the sole purpose of kissing him. Their lips fit together perfectly and the sensation was so mind-blowing that Makoto had to wrap his arm around Haruka's waist for leverage, like he would be swept away if he let go.

If Makoto had been told that he would share his first kiss with the crown prince of a neighbouring kingdom, he would have laughed in disbelief. Yet here he was, sitting in the gardens of the palace of Iwatobi, kissing Prince Haruka Nanase who he had grown so fond of in such a short time. He could barely even believe it now, even as he felt the slow and tender pressure of his mouth on his.

He seemingly wasn't the only one who was inexperienced; Haruka's movements were a little unsure yet nonetheless passionate and Makoto gently squeezed his hand. Every last fiber of his being was filled with warmth and affection and butterflies were roaming through his stomach like crazy, setting his body ablaze from within.

The hand that was on Makoto's face drifted into his hair and Haruka's fingers tangled through his brown locks, feeling like heaven against his scalp. Their current position was a little awkward and not exactly ideal for kissing, but they didn't let that hold them back; there was absolutely nothing that could stop the force that was attracting them to each other.
In a need to bring their bodies even closer together, Haruka released his hold on Makoto's hand to wrap his arm around his neck. Even if he had previously thought that he never wanted to let go of his smooth hand, Makoto definitely wasn't complaining now. His other hand found its place on Haruka's slender waist and the kiss was so tender that all of his insides just turned fuzzy at the touch of Haruka's plush lips against his.

But Makoto actually melted when he felt Haruka's tongue swiping along his lips, requesting permission to enter and he opened his mouth to let his own tongue meet Haruka's halfway. He had absolutely no clue what he was supposed to do but that didn't matter, because from the moment Haruka's tongue touched his, every trace of his common sense disappeared and his mind was unable to produce any coherent thoughts any longer. It was hot and soft and it just felt so incredibly good that Makoto's hands immediately came up to cup his face, that seemed so small cradled in his large palms. His fingers were gentle against his porcelain skin, holding him so carefully like Haruka would shatter beneath his touch if he added too much pressure.

A soft moan slipped into the kiss when Haruka licked into his mouth, involuntarily leaving Makoto's body at the sensation but in response Haruka hummed as well, his fingers eagerly trying to touch as much of him as possible. They ultimately settled around his neck again and he lightly stroked Makoto's nape, tickling the small hairs there.

This afternoon Makoto wondered what Haruka's lips tasted like and how they would feel against his own, and he had no idea that he didn't have to wait long to find out the answer to both of those questions: like absolute heaven. He'd always had a sweet tooth but he had never tasted anything that was as sweet as Haruka and he had no words to describe how lovely his mouth felt against his own, for it was simply inexplicable. All he knew was that he would never grow tired of kissing Haruka, because it made him feel so much joy and bliss, pure and unadulterated affection seeping through in a way he had never felt before.

The last thing Makoto wanted at that moment was to stop kissing him for he wanted this moment to last for all eternity, but Haruka's lips were leaving him breathless so he had no other choice but to end their kiss. Apparently Haruka had not run out of air yet - or hadn't had enough of Makoto's lips yet - and when Makoto pulled away, he followed his lips back up and whined softly in protest. Then he realised what he was doing and pulled back as well, and Makoto wasn't sure if the blush that adorned his cheeks was there from embarrassment or if it had already been there while they were kissing.

In order to suppress a chuckle of endearment, Makoto complied with his wish and pressed another chaste kiss against Haruka's wet lips. He had absolutely nothing against the idea of kissing Haruka for the remainder of the night, but he had to take a moment to catch his breath before he could continue. Gently he rested his forehead against Haruka's and they sighed simultaneously in delight.

The look in Haruka's endlessly blue eyes was one that was softened with affection yet they were filled with yearning for more. His pretty lips were a little red and matched the colour of his cheeks, and he was just so extraordinarily beautiful. He truly was the pinnacle of flawlessness.

"Haru," Makoto gasped against Haruka's mouth, feeling his hot breath ghosting over his skin. He still couldn't believe that they had actually just kissed, that Haruka actually returned his feelings. Even if the signs had all been there, Makoto hadn't wanted to get ahead of himself and possibly interpret his feelings the wrong way, but now Haruka had confirmed them himself, both verbally and physically and he really, truly could not remember a time he had ever been happier than he was right now. Everything was simply perfect.

"Nagisa."
At that breathy whisper, Makoto's heart stopped. Every warm and fuzzy feeling in his body from their confessions and kisses turned into ice. The butterflies were no longer fluttering; they froze and shattered into a million pieces along with everything else inside of him at the sound of the name that wasn't his.

This was not a dream, but it wasn't real either. None of this was. He was a poser, an imposter, not the person Haruka thought he was. Haruka thought that they were going to get married and live happily ever after but he knew better than that; he knew that once Rei found Nagisa, he was going to run away only to never see Haruka again. And despite knowing this, he had willingly played along with it all. He had willingly toyed with Haruka's heart despite knowing better simply for his own selfish desires, just because Haruka happened to be the kindest and most beautiful person he had ever met. He had allowed himself to live in a fantasy for these past few days, but now the delusion was over.

Tears were welling up in Makoto's eyes as reality struck him like lightning and he mumbled, "I'm sorry," as he abruptly let go of Haruka and pulled himself out of his arms.

"What?" Haruka questioned, his voice so small and light and the confusion and worry were evident in his eyes, his eyebrows furrowing in concern.

"I'm so sorry," Makoto said again before he got up and began to run away.

"Nagisa, wait!" Haruka called as he saw Makoto go, reaching out to hold him back but Makoto was faster than he was. "Wait, Nagisa! Nagisa!"

The pain was clear in Haruka's voice, but Makoto didn't stop running as his tears spilled over.

Even if he had known from the start that things would turn out like this, it had just been so easy to forget. Haruka rarely called him 'Nagisa'; he could count the amounts of times he said it on one hand, so it was easy to forget. When Haruka looked at him like he was the world and when he smiled like there was nothing wrong in the universe, it was so easy to forget.

But he hadn't forgotten. In every second spent by his side, Makoto deep down knew that there was a reason he was here, and that it wasn't to be together with Haruka. That he was only here to stall time, to put on a façade that reduced the damage for Nagisa, who had impulsively and irresponsibly ran away from his duties only to let others clean up the mess he left behind. He knew that he had agreed to it not so much to help him and Rei, but mainly to save his own family, because he was too incompetent to take care of them otherwise.

He knew all of this, yet he had repressed it, pushed it so far away that it was easy to ignore until he was directly confronted with it again and everything resurfaced. He had repressed it in the hopes that maybe, for once, he could be happy not for his parents, not for Ran and Ren, not for the neighbours and townsfolk, but for himself. And he had been; he had been so immensely happy and ultimately that led to him hurting the one person he couldn't bear to hurt. That was like a knife right in his heart.

Although these gardens were massive and maze-like, in his distress Makoto had no trouble finding his way back to the palace, seemingly getting there solely out of muscle memory.

Only when he got to his room did he come to a halt. He swung the door open with such force that it immediately clicked shut behind him again and he threw himself onto the bed, burying his face in a pillow as tears continued to pour from his eyes.

How could he have been so stupid? When he told himself that he should make the most out of
every opportunity he encountered, this was not exactly what he had in mind. And yet he didn't regret it. Despite his guilt towards Haruka, he didn't regret it. Even if the last thing he ever wanted was to hurt Haruka and he had done just that, he didn't regret any of it because these past few days had truly been the most precious time of his life and he knew that he would never experience something like this again. He hated himself for feeling this way, but he would still treasure every second he got to spend at Haruka's side. He would cherish this time forevermore.

Nagisa had been right. Sometimes, love really is a feeling. Sometimes you fall in love and you just can't help it. You know that it could never work out because of the circumstances, but you can't erase the feelings in your heart.

And Makoto knew he had fallen in love with Haruka.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed!

Although this is technically a fantasy universe and therefore the music that I mentioned wouldn't necessarily exist, I still wanted to include it to give you more of an idea of what Haru played and what they danced to. Like Haru said, it wouldn't be the same as the actual compositions since there wasn't a full orchestra playing, but to give you an idea, here's the music mentioned in this chapter. I also put the titles in the languages they're most commonly known by so it wouldn't sound all too strange. (I wanted to include the links too but for some reason the archive is not really working with me right now and deletes half of my end note when I try, so I'm sorry for the inconvenience.)
Danse Macabre by Camille Saint-Saëns
Waltz of the Flowers by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Sobre las Olas by Juventino Rosas
Voices of Spring by Johann Strauss II

I know a lot of people have been wondering what's going on with Rei and Nagisa, but for the sake of my own agenda I needed you to stay in the dark for now and experience everything with Makoto. I promise they'll definitely come back, so I hope you understand.

I hope you liked this chapter and if you did, I would love to hear your thoughts. As always you can find me on Tumblr and Twitter @DatHeetJoella if you want to chat or anything, really.

I wish you all a wonderful day and I hope to see you at the next chapter as well!
Shackled and Bound

Chapter Summary

With the big secret out, there was nothing Makoto could do but wallow in his grief. But perhaps things were not quite over just yet.

Chapter Notes

First of all, sorry it took me a little longer than usual for this chapter to come out. The reason for that is that this chapter is really long (more than 21k words so brace yourself) and therefore it took me a lot longer to proofread it. I kept getting distracted too and I think that's because I was a little hesitant about this chapter. Not only because of its length, because it does feel really long, but also because it's very dialogue-heavy and I'm not entirely sure about the response that this chapter may get, but I'll say more about that later. Sorry about this in advance.

Second, if you've been reading from the start then you may have noticed that I changed the chapter count from 6 to 8. The reason for that is because, when I was writing chapter 6, I soon realised that it would be impossible for me to push all that I had planned into one chapter. So instead, I decided to give it not one, but two extra chapters so it wouldn't feel too cramped and give it a little more room to breathe. I hope you understand and that you'll stick around for the upcoming chapters as well.

But because I decided to give it two extra chapters, I'm not entirely sure if I can keep up with the previous update schedule. I still need to figure out how I'm going to do things and I can't guarantee that I'll be able to deliver the rest of this story in a consistent updating schedule. The reason for this is that I don't want to rush myself, so again, I hope you understand.

I've talked enough for now, so I hope you'll enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the guards entered his room to apprehend him, Makoto didn't put up a fight.

What would have been the point when he knew from the start that he was committing a crime? He had known it and still done it, so now it was time to accept the consequences of that crime. Not that running away would have helped him anyway; he was in a palace that was surrounded by guards, in the middle of a kingdom he didn't know, far away from home. Protest would have been futile.

To keep the last sliver that remained of his dignity, he wiped the tears off his cheeks with his jacket's sleeve before he allowed the guards to shackle him. Without a word he followed them to what he presumed to be the dungeon.

He had never been to a dungeon before, but they were as cold and dark as he always imagined. The walls and ground were made of stone and the room was dimly lit by torches, revealing the bars of
the cells and the crates that presumably served as chairs for the patrolling guards. There weren't that many cells and all of them were empty - though not for long.

Once he was inside one of the cells, the guard that led him here was kind enough to unshackle him before he locked the cell-door behind him and sat down on one of the crates. Ignoring the beds that hung from the walls, Makoto plopped down onto the floor, drew his legs to his chest and buried his face in his knees.

He never expected the day to come where he would actually be locked in a dungeon. Up until now he had always been a good person; he always did his best to be as kind and compassionate as he could and always tried to be helpful to those around him. Despite his family's poverty and not having dinner some nights, he never stole anything and earned every coin fairly and through hard work. Fraudulence was about the last thing he ever expected to be arrested for, but here he was, sitting beneath the ground because he had pretended to be a prince. A crime of the highest shelf. He didn't know if the laws and punishments were the same here in Iwatobi as they were in Sano, but he knew that the chance was high that he was going to pay for this with his life. He had known that from the beginning and he had accepted that.

It wasn't so much that he had wanted to die, but he would gladly give his life for his family and in a way, he was doing that now - that was, if Rei kept his promise, but he had faith in Rei and believed that he was an honest man who would fulfill his part of their deal and even if there was no way he could know this for sure, he couldn't bear to consider otherwise right now. He had been okay with it, because he got out of bed every morning to take care of his loved ones and this was the only way he thought he could do that. Even if he really hadn't wanted to die, he could accept his death as long as he had fulfilled his duty.

Those were the terms that he made his decision on, but that was before he met Haruka.

He thought that he knew all of the cards in his hand, but he had been wrong. Haruka was the missing factor in the equation, the one aspect he had failed to regard and include. Of course, he knew that the whole point of this agreement was that he would meet Haruka in Nagisa's stead, but he had never thought about what that entailed. Up until then, 'Prince Haruka' was just a concept, a faceless name and nothing more than that. He had never even considered the possibility that he would actually fall in love with him.

But then he met Haruka and his entire world was turned upside down, because he was the most wonderful and lovely person Makoto had ever met. In hindsight, he knew that this fate had been inevitable from the first moment their gazes met and with every fleeting touch, with every badly-suppressed smile, with every look into his breathtaking eyes Makoto fell harder for him. It had never been his intention, but he had done nothing to stop it either because for the first time in his life, he felt genuine happiness. Not that he would have been able to stop it even if he tried, for the force that drew him to Haruka was simply too strong.

Though the very last thing he expected was that Haruka would fall for him too. It was obvious that Makoto would fall in love with him at some point because he was just so perfect in every sense of the word that there was absolutely nothing that could ever keep Makoto from being charmed by him, but the fact that Haruka actually returned his feelings was just unbelievable. What was plain and simple Makoto next to the talented and gorgeous Prince Haruka? There were so many people who were so much better than him and Haruka could choose anyone he wanted and they would accept with no doubt, yet he had chosen him and while that made him indescribably happy, he wished that he hadn't. Because now he had gone and broken Haruka's heart while he deserved to be nothing but treasured and cherished for every minute of his life. And even if Makoto wanted to do just that, he knew from the beginning that they could never be together. But Haruka hadn't known
that and he had given himself wholeheartedly to someone who did not deserve even a hint of his affection, because he thought they were going to spend the rest of their lives together and Makoto couldn't even begin to describe how guilty he felt.

Even if Haruka deserved the world and Makoto could never give him that, his selfish heart still wanted to have Haruka all to himself. Haruka had given him so much in such a short time and yet he still hadn't had enough; he could never get enough of him.

And suddenly, Makoto wasn't okay with his predetermined fate anymore. He had never wanted to die but he'd been able to accept it. But now, for the first time in his life, Makoto wanted to live.

Perhaps he would be lucky enough that Haruka cherished the time they spent together enough to grant him mercy, and maybe to let him see his family one last time so he could apologise and say goodbye to them. Haruka surely had the authority to spare him, but then again, he most likely also had the authority to order for his death without a trial. While he knew Haruka cared about him and wouldn't just let someone be killed off, Makoto didn't know how much he was hurting right now and in a wave of anger he might decide on something he normally wouldn't. Maybe he hurt him so much that Haruka was seeking vengeance and was arranging his execution right at this second.

These thoughts were actively coursing through his mind, but regardless of whether they were true or not, there was not a single feeling inside his heart for Haruka but love. And he knew that it would remain that way until the day he died, be it a hundred years from now, or today.

If there was one last wish he had, it would be to speak to Haruka one more time. Then he would apologise and tell him how guilty he felt, that it had never been his intention to hurt him. He would tell him that even if he had lied to him countless of times, even if he had not been the person he thought he was, his feelings for him were not fake. He would tell him how much he cared for him and that these past few days were the most beautiful ones of his entire life. He wouldn't ask for forgiveness, because Haruka had every right to be furious at him, but he hoped that the memories that he made with him could mean something to him, that he would remember the time they spent together not with a bitter taste, but with a fond smile.

Because Makoto recalled them with a fond smile as well, even as tears were spilling from his eyes again. Even as he was sitting here on the ground of a dungeon and had never been further away from home, he was so glad that he got the chance to meet Haruka, so thankful for the time he got to spend with him and for the memories they got to make. But most of all, he was grateful to Haruka for teaching him what true happiness felt like, for letting him experience how wonderful it was to be in love, even if there was no happy ending in sight for him.

Regardless of what happened to him, Makoto would never forget all that Haruka had given him and he would love him forevermore.

Then, the heavy door to the dungeon was opened and he heard a familiar voice, that forcefully pulled him from his sorrowful thoughts.

"Ow! Can't you be a little more gentle? Seriously what is your problem?"

Makoto looked up from his knees to see Kisumi struggling in the hold of two guards. When their eyes met, Kisumi's body went limp and his jaw dropped. It wasn't clear who was more surprised to see the other.

With Kisumi having stopped resisting, it was a lot easier for the guards to maneuver him and one of the guards let go of him so he could unlock the door to Makoto's cell and the other man threw Kisumi inside, causing him to fall on his hands and knees quite harshly.
While Kisumi was pouting and yelling some more accusations at the guards who had apparently apprehended him rather roughly, Makoto was genuinely wondering why they put him in the same cell as his; not that he was complaining, it just didn't seem like the smartest thing to do, especially since all the other cells were free too.

The guards walked away without even dignifying Kisumi with a reaction of some sort, leaving the two of them alone with one of the guards that had brought Makoto here. Kisumi huffed in exasperation before he turned to the man that stayed behind.

"Hey," he called to gather the guard's attention and when he got it, he sheepishly asked, "Could you, maybe, unshackle me now?" Apparently the guard eyed him sceptically because he quickly continued, "It's not like I can go anywhere or do anything, so please?"

The guard sighed in defeat at the puppy eyes and pout that Kisumi gave him before he got out the key. "Fine, but don't try anything."

"I promise!" Kisumi exclaimed as he held up his palms to prove his sincerity, but then he remembered that he needed to hold out his arms so the guard could actually unshackle him.

Once his wrists were free Kisumi thanked him with a beaming smile and then it became quiet again. Kisumi stayed close to the bars though, like he was keeping an eye on everything that happened outside of their cell, but Makoto didn't have the energy or care to ask him what he was doing.

It didn't take much longer until the silence was disrupted by the sound of snoring, and then, with a last glance at the entrance of the dungeon, Kisumi crawled over to him and sat down next to him. It was then that Makoto realised what he had been doing; he wanted to ensure that they were alone and there was no one eavesdropping on the conversation they would ultimately have, so he had waited until the guard fell asleep. Fortunately it was currently in the middle of the night and in the dimly lit room it wasn't hard to doze off when doing nothing but sitting there and waiting for nothing.

"Are you alright?" Kisumi asked, his voice laced with genuine concern as he put his hand on Makoto's shoulder.

For the first time in his life, Makoto answered that question truthfully. "No, I'm not alright."

The expression on Kisumi's face fell at that answer. Even if it was obvious that he wasn't alright considering they were currently locked in a dungeon, there was something that was incredibly grim at hearing him confirm it aloud. "What happened?" he asked, knowing just how much Makoto and Haruka liked each other and being unable to find what it was that caused them to be in this situation now.

"He called me his name," Makoto mumbled as he could feel the tears burning in his eyes again. When Kisumi frowned in confusion, he raised his voice a little. "He called me "Nagisa" and I… I ran away."

Although he had left out the details because he felt like they were too personal to share, Kisumi understood what he meant anyway. "Oh no," he sighed at the fact that that was what crushed his façade.

"It was just so easy to pretend," Makoto sobbed, being unable to keep his emotions in any longer. "He rarely called me "Nagisa" so it was easy to pretend."
"Shh," Kisumi shushed as he rubbed Makoto's back in a way that was supposed to soothe him, "It's okay, it's alright."

Being a big brother meant that he was used to being the one to comfort others when they were crying, but now his entire world had crumbled right before his eyes, Makoto allowed himself to be comforted by Kisumi instead. He cried into his knees while Kisumi kept whispering reassurances to him, gently stroking his hand over Makoto's back in a steady rhythm.

Makoto didn't know how much time passed before he stopped crying, feeling embarrassed about losing his composure since that was about the only thing he'd had left. He tried to gather himself and he wiped cheeks with his sleeves once more. "Sorry," he hiccupped, feeling guilty towards Kisumi for having to comfort him like he was a child while he was in the same boat as he was, and it was all his fault.

"It's alright," Kisumi repeated with an understanding smile that told him that there was no need for him to feel sorry. "I'm a big brother too, remember?"

Now that he mentioned it, Makoto did recall Kisumi telling him about his little brother when they were on the carriage that brought them here. The aura of comfort that hung around Kisumi like a cloak at this very moment was one that was unmistakably of an elder brother, and under any other circumstances, Makoto would have probably been the one to wear it himself. And while he was still embarrassed and felt guilty for dragging Kisumi into this, he was really grateful that he was here with him now.

"You've got a lot of things going on right now, Makoto, so it's only natural that you're upset. Things may seem really grim now, but everything's going to be alright."

"How do you know that?" Makoto yelled in despair and disbelief, not giving him time to respond before he continued, "How can you be so calm? Aren't you worried? You're an accomplice to a very serious crime! We could be in here for the rest of our lives! Or worse…"

"I am a little worried," Kisumi admitted calmly, not fazed by Makoto's sudden eruption of emotion, "I don't want to be here for the rest of my life, and I don't want to die either. But I just have the feeling that everything's going to be alright."

"Why did you even agree to this in the first place?" Makoto questioned in bewilderment, not knowing why he had never asked him this before. He had a motive to do this and so did Rei, but Kisumi had absolutely no reason nor did he benefit of getting himself involved in this mess.

"I'm not really sure. Maybe I was getting a little tired of the daily life inside the palace. Looking for some excitement, an adventure to shake things up," Kisumi said with a dreamy smile, but Makoto could easily tell that wasn't the truth. When he realised that Makoto saw right through his lies, his smile faltered and turned a little more melancholic. "Nagisa's a good kid. I watched him grow up inside the palace, so he's kind of like a little brother to me - or a cousin, you know what I mean - and I saw how he always hid his loneliness behind his bubbly demeanour. When Rei was appointed as his tutor, he was so happy; I still remember the wide smile on his face. And since then, his smile never faded and though he never outright said anything to me, I knew there was more going on between them.

"When he heard that he was arranged to marry Prince Haruka, he was absolutely devastated. So, in the hopes of giving him some comfort, I requested if I could be the one to accompany him to Iwatobi, and fortunately the king and queen complied. On the night we were supposed to depart, Rei came into my room looking more dishevelled and panicked that I'd ever seen him and he told me that Nagisa had run away. I wasn't surprised, honestly, but I knew he was going to get in a lot of
trouble if he didn't show up. Rei told me about you and your plan and he asked me to go along with it. I knew from the start that this plan was doomed to fail, because how could it not, but I also knew that no one else would be crazy enough to agree to something like this and you would all be found out before your plan even started. Rei was so desperate, and even if I knew there was no positive outcome possible, I also knew that I would regret it for the rest of my life if I refused, if I didn't help him and Nagisa out." Kisumi paused for a second to let Makoto process this information before he continued, "I would rather regret something I did do than regret something I didn't do. That's why I agreed to go along with this."

He finished with a genuine smile and Makoto felt even more guilty, because in a way, Kisumi's reason seemed so much more sincere than his own; Kisumi was doing this to help his friends while he only did it for the reward he would get - that would ultimately lead to his family surviving, but at this point Makoto was only able to see the bad things in himself.

"Aren't you scared?" he couldn't help but ask, because surely he didn't want to lose his life over something like this.

"I'm not. Of course, I don't want to die, but we're not going to."

"But what if we will?"

"Then I can say for sure that I died without having any regrets," Kisumi stated with a grin, but Makoto felt the complete opposite: he didn't have enough hands to count all the regrets he had on, even if this plan wasn't one of them. "But we're not going to."

"How can you say that for sure?" Makoto questioned because contrary to before, the confidence was now evident in Kisumi's voice.

"Nagisa would never let that happen, and I'm quite sure Prince Haruka wouldn't either," Kisumi declared, before he thought about what he had just said and continued, "Actually, scrap that. You don't have anything to worry about, but he might have me killed."

Kisumi chuckled at his own remark but Makoto didn't get what was so funny. "Why would he spare me but kill you?" he asked in confusion. After all, he was the one who hurt Haruka, not Kisumi.

"Because he loves you, but he sees me as an obstacle. A nuisance," Kisumi teased like he was trying to lighten up the air between them.

"I'm sure that's not true," Makoto brushed off, really not in the mood for playful banter. "Even if we somehow don't get the death penalty, that means we'll be stuck here for the rest of our lives." And to be quite honest, Makoto wasn't entirely sure which fate was worse, for even if he really didn't want to die, at least his misery would be over soon instead of having to fade away in here for years to come, to die alone and forgotten.

"Actually, I don't think that will happen either."

At this point Makoto was getting a headache with how hard he was frowning, because every word that left Kisumi's mouth confused him more than the previous one. "How so?"

Kisumi smirked a little as he looked up at the stone ceiling. "Pretty much every story has a happy ending."

For a second Makoto thought he had misheard him, but when he realised that was exactly what he had uttered, Makoto began to question if this short period of time inside this dungeon was already
eating away at Kisumi's sanity. "Yes, but this is not a story, this is real life." And unfortunately, there were many who didn't get a happy end in reality, certainly not criminals and their accomplices.

"See, that's where you're wrong," Kisumi stated as he turned back to Makoto, gesticulating while he spoke, "Your life is a story, and you're the protagonist. Yes, there are some things that you don't have influence over, like the setting and circumstances, but you do have control over the things you do and the choices you make. And that's why you have to take every opportunity you get to rewrite your own story in the direction you want it to go in. The choices you made are the reason you're here right now, and admittedly, you've brought yourself into a rather tight spot. There might not be a lot of things you can do from this point on, but if you do get a chance then you have to take it and do your best to make things right. Sitting here and sulking is not going to help you, it's only going to make you more miserable. It's not too late yet, and if you get the opportunity to speak with Prince Haruka again, then take it with both hands. Explain everything to him and tell him how you feel. You don't have any control over his response, but regardless of what he decides to do, you'll know for sure that you tried everything you could."

Makoto bit his lip and averted his eyes as he repeated Kisumi's words in his head.

In a way, he was right. Up until now he had believed that he had irreversibly messed up, that everything had been shattered beyond repair, but it might not be too late just yet. If there was an opening somewhere, then he had to do his best to squeeze through and try to make things right. He couldn't give up just yet, because for the first time in his life, he felt like he had found something other than his family that he wanted to fight for; someone who was worth fighting for. Even if the whole world may be against it, there was someone for who he would defy the universe itself and he would be damned if he let an opportunity slip away because he was sulking and feeling sorry for himself. If there was a chance, a tiny, tiny chance that he might be able to be together with Haruka like they had both been longing for, then he was going to do everything he could to make that seemingly impossible dream into a reality. He was going to rewrite his own fate.

Suddenly, there was a stream of light inside of the dark tunnel, a ray of hope lighting up inside of him like he had finally found the end of the cave after wandering around in the darkness for an eternity, lost and afraid. The fear and sorrow were drowned out by hope and love, filling Makoto's senses like the endearing smile on Haruka's soft and handsome features always did. He was going to live to see that smile again or he was going to die trying.

"Thank you, Kisumi," Makoto said with a sincere smile, and when Kisumi saw the determination in Makoto's eyes, he smiled as well.

"Everyone is the protagonist of their own story," he continued in an almost whimsical tone, like he was reading him a fairytale, "However, that does not mean that all of our stories are separate. Every story is connected to each other; they intertwine to form the book of life. This means that others influence parts of our stories in a way that we don't have any control over ourselves." He paused for what Makoto assumed to be dramatic effect, but then his grin widened as he said softly, "So even when you don't have any control over a situation, and times have never seem more grim before, there will always be others to help you out. In the most dire of circumstances, you can count on your friends to lighten the burden and help you figure something out."

"You're not alone," was what Kisumi had meant, we're all here for you so you don't have to worry about having to carry everything on your shoulders.

Rei had been right: Kisumi was a very reliable man and he had helped them in a way no one else would have even considered. Although Makoto hadn't known Kisumi for long yet, in this short
time they spent together he had treated him like an old friend and did his best to support and comfort him, encouraged him to chase after his dreams and to follow his heart. Makoto couldn't describe how thankful he was that Kisumi was here for him, because he most likely wouldn't have been able to live through this trial without his moral support, especially in this current situation. Without Kisumi, they never would have gotten to this point and even if his assistance couldn't change the inevitable outcome, the road up until here would have been much less pleasant without his guidance.

"Thanks," Makoto repeated, because he truly did appreciate what Kisumi had done for him despite only having met him about four days ago.

In response, Kisumi gave him another pat on his back, his smile never wavering. He opened his mouth to say something but he was interrupted by a sudden loud snore coming from outside of their cell, startling them both before they giggled lightly.

"Well then, I suppose it's best if we go follow his example," Kisumi chuckled, "It's late and we have no idea what awaits us in the morning, so we better gather our strength and get some sleep."

"You're right," Makoto agreed, though he doubted if he would be able sleep right now; his mind was flooded with thoughts of things he could say to Haruka and the possible ways Haruka could react to them. But since Kisumi meant well and had already done enough to help him, he kept his mouth shut and got up, dusting off his borrowed clothing. After all, it would be unfair of him to ask even more of Kisumi and rob him of the sleep he probably needed dearly.

They both settled themselves on one of the "beds" that hung on either side of the wall and wished each other goodnight. Makoto purposely faced the wall, not wanting Kisumi to notice that he was still lost in thought.

Like he had expected, he really couldn't sleep because his mind was too full and adrenaline was rapidly coursing through his veins. If he had the opportunity to then he would bolt out of this cell this instant and run up to Haruka's bedroom to tell him the truth and get everything off his chest, but unfortunately he knew that wasn't possible. He had always regarded himself as someone who was very patient, but in this situation it felt like every minute passed even slower than the previous one and lying here and not being able to do anything was agonising.

All kinds of scenarios were playing through his head and he was already trying to think of what he could say to Haruka if he got the chance to speak with him again. How would Haruka react to all of this? Would he be so furious that he never wanted to see him again, or would his feelings be strong enough that he could overlook all of this? Would he feel so betrayed that he could never trust him again, or would he be willing to give him a second chance?

Makoto honestly couldn't tell. Like Kisumi had said, he had no idea what awaited him in the morning so there was nothing that he could predict about Haruka's response. Though he hoped with all his heart that his time with Haruka was far from over, from a rational standpoint he could completely understand if Haruka didn't want to have anything to do with him again. Only time would tell.

Hours passed and Makoto drifted in and out of sleep without ever having felt like he had actually slept, for his thoughts were all over the place and he dearly wished that he could have turned them off. If he could go to sleep then he wouldn't have to worry anymore and he would wake up when he could actually do something, yet now he had to wait and be conscious of every second that ticked by.

This was surely the longest night of his life. It was odd for him to not be able to fall asleep because
it had never been a problem before. During the day he often looked forward to finally plopping down on his bed again and he was usually so exhausted that he immediately nodded off when his head hit his pillow.

Although the bed he shared with the twins for warmth wasn't exactly as soft as the one in his guest room here, compared to this piece of metal he was currently lying on, sleeping in his own bed felt like sleeping on a cloud. Next to that, it was rather cold without a blanket, yet he didn't want to wake the guard to ask for one either. In a way, this was a form of punishment for himself because he felt like he didn't deserve a blanket anyway. But he was glad that it was summer; he couldn't imagine the kind of cold that would seep into his bones if it was freezing and he had nothing but his own body's heat.

Since there was no source of natural light in this dungeon, it was hard to tell how much time had passed and it felt like there would be no end to this night. Perhaps it was well into the afternoon already and they hadn't even been served breakfast. There was no way Makoto could tell except for the fact that the guard was still fast asleep, but he might just be someone who likes to sleep in or just slept since there wasn't much else he could do.

It felt like a new decade had started by the time the heavy door swung open again and the sound of footsteps echoed through the hollow space. Immediately both Makoto and Kisumi sat up on their beds.

"Is it time for breakfast already?" Kisumi wondered as he hopped onto the ground and strolled over to the bars. "I'm starving!"

Ignoring Kisumi's question, one of the guards announced, "Prince Haruka has requested your presence."

Makoto's heart jumped at those words and nerves started to coil in his stomach again. This was it.

The guard opened the door of their cell and commanded them to hold out their arms so he could shackle them once more. In addition to the shackles around their wrists, this time the guards shackled their ankles as well, most likely to prevent them from running off if they saw the opportunity to since the men probably had no idea what Haruka intended to do with them.

It was a bit harder to walk with his ankles chained to each other, since he usually took much larger steps than the shackles allowed and the way the guard was pulling his wrists to get him to move faster didn't help much either. The shackles chafed uncomfortably over his skin but Makoto didn't complain about it; the guard that was leading him didn't seem to be in the best of moods and it wouldn't be wise to enrage him further, for channeling the wrath of a guard who currently had control over him wasn't exactly the smartest thing he could do.

Kisumi, on the other hand, tried a different method; he was talking to the guard that was pulling him forward in the hopes of lifting his spirit a little and therefore get him to handle him with a bit more care. The mood of that guard didn't seem to be as sour as the one that was leading Makoto, and Kisumi's friendly and flamboyant demeanour did seem to charm the man, but then Makoto's guard called him to attention and he abruptly shut his mouth. If Makoto's feeling was correct, then the guard that was leading him was most likely the captain and the guard that was in charge of Kisumi his younger subordinate.

The guards soon vanished from Makoto's mind when they were lead into the throne room and he could make out two figures who were already sitting on the floor. It wasn't until they got closer that he realised the figures were of Rei and Nagisa.
Immediately Makoto's jaw dropped and he wanted to call out to them, but then he saw Haruka standing in front of them. There were bags under his beautiful eyes and they were red as well, like he had spent the entire night crying instead of sleeping, he looked more dishevelled than ever and his face was twisted in an expression Makoto had never seen on his face before: anger.

All of the things Makoto had fabricated in his mind during the night dissipated when he was confronted with Haruka's rage and all he felt was a rock of guilt inside of his stomach, weighing down on him and making him feel sick. But he was surprised when he noticed that Haruka's anger was not targeted at him, but at the guard that took him here.

When they were in front of Haruka, the guard roughly pulled Makoto so he fell on his knees, and soon thereafter Kisumi followed him down to the floor. Haruka took a step closer to them and without batting an eye at them, he turned to the guard.

"Give me the keys to their shackles."

Haruka's voice had been cold and harsh, laced with something Makoto had never heard from him before, but he was even more bewildered at the words he had spoken. Apparently the guard was startled by this too and he stuttered, "B-But, Your Highness-"

"Give me," Haruka repeated sternly, "the keys."

Knowing that he could not go against the prince's authority, the guard reluctantly handed over the keys and Haruka snatched them out of his hands.

"Don't act on your own accord again," he warned and though the 'or else' was unspoken, no more words were needed to understand what he meant. "You're dismissed." When the guard hesitated and didn't move, Haruka yelled, "Go! Leave, all of you!"

The venom in Haruka's voice was enough to startle every person in the room and Makoto couldn't do anything but stare up at him with his mouth hanging open in surprise. It was obvious that he had never seen this kind of display of raw emotion from him before, but the rest of the guards and staff were also shocked by him raising his voice and barking out orders like that. He had assumingly never lost his cool like that before.

Once all of the staff members were gone, the angered expression melted from his features as he crouched in front of Makoto, concern written across his face.

"Are you alright?" he asked with genuine worry as he began to unlock his shackles, "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

Makoto was simply unable to answer, gaping up at Haruka as his brain was trying to process all of this new information. Haruka was worried about him, about the guards hurting him, and he had told the guard that he shouldn't act on his own accord again. Did that mean that Haruka had nothing to do with them being apprehended and thrown in the dungeon? Did Haruka not know yet?

In the meanwhile Haruka had freed him of both of the shackles and he threw them aside, like he was sure they wouldn't be needed anymore. Then he turned his attention back to Makoto's wrists, caressing the red marks on his skin.

"Haru..."

His name left Makoto without his awareness, a soft whisper that was somehow filled with every conflicting emotion that burned inside his heart. Despite the redness and exhaustion that was clear in them, Haruka's expressive eyes were still so beautiful and Makoto could read all of his feelings
in them; beside his worry there was affection and a hint of guilt, but there was mainly confusion. All of this confirmed that his speculations were true: Haruka didn't know yet.

"Um…?" Kisumi's voice broke them out of their trance and Haruka stood up abruptly. "Could you unshackle me too?"

Carelessly he tossed the keys towards Kisumi, who struggled to catch them with his wrists still chained together, before Haruka turned around. Makoto helped Kisumi unshackle his wrists so he could unlock the ones around his ankles himself.

Then it was quiet for a moment and Makoto dared to sneak a glance over at Rei and Nagisa, who looked to be as exhausted and confused as he felt. Everyone held their breath and waited for Haruka to say or do something, afraid to break the silence themselves. Haruka ran his eyes over all of them and apparently concluded that despite all of them being confused, he was the only one who was in the dark.

He pinched the bridge of his nose before he sighed. "Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Haru, I-"

"It's all my fault!" Nagisa interrupted, raising his hand and leaning up on his knees to draw more attention to himself.

"Who are you?" Haruka questioned, making it sound like he had been wondering that for a while now; like he and Rei were presented to him with no explanation whatsoever.

"I'm Nagisa," Nagisa stated slowly and almost shamefully. When Haruka frowned, Nagisa raised his voice, "Prince Nagisa Hazuki of Sano."

Immediately Haruka looked over to Makoto with his mouth hanging open and in addition to his confusion, Makoto could see panic beginning to bubble up inside of him. The look in his eyes was desperate, like he was begging Makoto to deny it, to claim that Nagisa was lying and he was actually the prince of Sano, but Makoto didn't. He averted his eyes in dejection, staring at his lap because he couldn't bear to witness the pain that flashed through Haruka.

A gasp left Haruka's body and he looked at Nagisa, then back at Makoto again. "B-But," he stuttered, and his voice had never sounded so small before, "if you're Nagisa then… then who are you?"

Makoto made the mistake of raising his head and when he saw the despair painted across Haruka's face, the pleading in his eyes, his heart broke. "I…" Makoto started, and despite his determination from before, he couldn't get the words that he rehearsed to come out. He scoffed, "I'm nobody."

Then, it was like everything shattered for Haruka too. Like he saw his world, the perfect future he had envisioned up until last night, crumble right before his eyes. He slapped his hand over his mouth in shock as his eyes filled with tears.

And then he ran.

Just like Makoto had yesterday, Haruka ran away from the scene while tears cascaded down his cheeks, because the dream they had been living in had officially fallen apart for him as well.

"Haru, wait!" Makoto called as he stumbled to get up, because contrary to yesterday, he knew he couldn't let Haruka run away from him, not without explaining himself. He had to make things
right, so he ran as fast as his legs could carry him.

Luckily for him, he was faster than Haruka and despite his headstart, he caught up to him in no time. Haruka had run outside to the platform that led down into the garden, where he had come to a halt. He was tightly gripping the edge of the stone railing, his knuckles turning white with how hard he was squeezing.

Makoto stopped about a meter behind him, his hands on his knees and panting lightly before he quickly straightened his back again. "Haru, wait! I can explain!"

"What is there to explain?" Haruka yelled through his tears and he turned back to face Makoto, "I fell in love with a lie!"

At those words, Makoto immediately shut his mouth, not knowing what he could say to that. Haruka was right, he was furious and he had every reason to be, but Makoto knew he had to at least try to get through to him.

"I should have known it was too good to be true," Haruka mumbled as he stared at his feet, warm tears dripping onto the marble floor.

"Haru," Makoto sighed, desperate to explain himself, "It's true, I lied to you but please try to understand. Nagisa had run away and- and Rei was in distress and he came to me in the middle of the night and he asked me to do this and I refused at first but then he promised me a high reward and I-"

"A high reward?" Haruka questioned, looking like he couldn't believe his ears. "Oh, so you're the type of person that needs money in order to help his friends?"

"What? No! But I…" Makoto tried to gather his thoughts, not knowing how to bring this nicely but needing Haruka to know the truth. "I'm poor, Haru. I'm really, really poor. I need the money to take care of my family."

"Your family," Haruka spat, raising his eyebrows in disbelief and his voice filled with disdain as he spoke.

"My parents and siblings," Makoto confirmed with a nod.

"Oh." Haruka appeared to be a little dumbfounded by that answer and when it truly got through to him, he seemed relieved for some reason. Had he thought that Makoto was talking about a spouse and children? But soon he regained his obstinate demeanour and continued, "So all of this was just a job to you?"

"No!" Makoto repeated, frantically running his hand through his hair as he tried his best to find the words that could mend this, knowing that Haruka was purposely being stubborn, "Haru, you know that's not true. Well, it was at first but, I… I thought I was doing the right thing; I was helping my family and Nagisa and Rei and-"

"Did you ever consider my feelings in this?" Haruka interrupted, biting his lip in an attempt to suppress his tears.

"No, I didn't," Makoto admitted, for even if it wasn't kind of him to say, it was the truth and he would never lie to Haruka again, "But I never expected you to actually fall in love with me!"

"Oh, so this is my fault?!" Haruka yelled, full of incredulity and venom at the accusal that he was the one to blame.
"No, it's my fault," Makoto declared in all honesty, having a hard time to hold in his own tears as well. "Because I never expected to actually fall in love with you either."

Those words made Haruka close his mouth, his eyes widening and his jaw dropped again when he realised what Makoto had told him, not knowing what to say. All kinds of different emotions rushed through him, washing down on him and making him unable to decide on what he should feel. Makoto saw this as his chance to actually say everything he wanted without Haruka interrupting him in his anger.

"Haru, I'm not the person you thought I was and I lied to you, I lied to you a lot," Makoto began, trying to make sense out of the jumble of words inside his head so he could actually tell Haruka everything he wanted to say in one cohesive explanation, "I didn't consider your feelings when I chose to do this, your reaction never even crossed my mind because you were just a name to me, not a person, and I was doing this to help my family. I knew it was risky and dangerous but I felt like I had no other choice, because there was no other way I could earn a proper living. But from the moment I first saw you I knew that this wasn't just a job, nor was it only for my family or for Rei and Nagisa. It was for myself. Because I actually started to fall for you, I knew I was, but I did nothing to stop it. Even if I knew from the beginning that it could never work out, being with you just made me so happy and I got the impression that maybe you were feeling the same way and I could pretend that I really was a prince, that we were really going to get married." Makoto paused rambling for a second because he knew he was straying from what he was actually trying to say. He took another deep breath before he continued, "I'm so sorry, Haru. I'm so incredibly sorry for hurting your feelings. It was never my intention to hurt you and I can't tell you how guilty I feel for lying to you. But I don't regret it."

Unconsciously, Makoto's hands came up to hold Haruka's face, just like he had yesterday. But it was not to kiss him this time, but to ensure that Haruka wouldn't look away from him and that he would properly take in every word that he was about to tell him. Haruka seemed surprised by this gesture, but did nothing to stop him, looking up and blue met green once again.

Knowing that he had Haruka's full attention, Makoto confessed, "I don't regret it because you are the kindest and most amazing person I have ever met and I would rather rot in jail for the rest of my life than to be free and live my life without ever having met you. Because it's meaningless without you."

Makoto hoped that he hadn't crossed a boundary by saying what he had, but it was the truth that burned so brightly inside of his heart and he wanted, no, needed Haruka to know.

When Haruka processed those words, his bottom lip trembled as tears welled up in his beautiful eyes again. In one swift movement he wrapped his arms around Makoto's back and buried his face in his shoulder as he broke down once more, softly crying into Makoto's body. To say that Makoto was a bit startled by this would have been an understatement, but he returned his embrace all the same, holding him tightly against himself.

"I'm so sorry, Haru," he mumbled against his hair as he gently stroked Haruka's back, trying to soothe him for as much as he could. He could very well understand that Haruka was incredibly upset and therefore crying, but that didn't mean that it didn't break his heart to see him in tears, especially since he had been the one who did this to him. He made him cry like this when he never wanted him to do anything but smile for every second of his life. That knowledge made a single tear roll down Makoto's cheek as well.

In response to Makoto's remorse Haruka only hid his face further into him, hiccupping slightly. Makoto was not quite sure what to make of this reaction, but despite his tears, the fact that he
sought out his touch for comfort had to mean something, right?

Although he had meant to hold himself back, Makoto couldn't stop himself from pressing a tiny kiss against his hair, nuzzling his locks as he whispered apologies to him. But instead of pulling away, Haruka only tightened his grip and to some degree, that was a reassuring relief to Makoto.

Gradually Haruka's hiccups passed as he calmed down a little, pulling back from where his head had been buried in Makoto's shoulder and straightening his spine. Makoto offered him a small smile as he unconsciously raised his hand to wipe the tears from Haruka's cheeks. Haruka didn't reject or shy away from his touch, allowing Makoto to remove the droplets that had left red tracks on his porcelain skin. He sniffed deeply and took a quivering breath as he tried to regain his composure.

"What is your name?"

That question astonished Makoto, because it was not a question one usually would have asked after already knowing someone so well. It was then that Makoto realised how ridiculous all of this had actually been; Haruka had fallen in love with him without as much as knowing his real name. And the fact that he cared enough to ask him now lifted a weight off his chest.

"Makoto," he said, and he couldn't describe how good it felt to finally tell him this. "Makoto Tachibana."

"Makoto," Haruka echoed softly, and his name had never sounded this lovely before. He repeated his name multiple times, like he was testing out how it felt on his tongue and trying to get it into his system. "Alright, Makoto," he stated after a while, his beautiful, red-rimmed eyes shining with resolve, "Tell me the truth. Every single lie you've told me, tell me the truth. Right now."

At those abrupt words Makoto's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, uh… well my name is Makoto. I'm eighteen years old, not seventeen, and my birthday isn't August first but November seventeenth. I'm the oldest child of three, not the youngest of four. I'm not a prince, I'm a blacksmith, but I guess nowadays I'm more of an errand boy and street musician…" Makoto tried his best to recall everything that he told Haruka that was false, but it was more difficult than it seemed. After all, he had told him so many lies that he had no idea where to start after the basics. "I've never been allergic to fish, I just never had it before because fish is very expensive and my family can't afford it. I don't like to read because I'm illiterate; I've never been to school because I've been working since I was a child in order to make the ends meet. I can't dance because I was never taught how to, I never needed to be able to dance, and I was never taught how to swim because… well I just wasn't," he trailed off, realising that he had not lied about that. "And Ran and Ren are not my cats, they're my siblings! And-"

Despite the countless of lies he had told, it really was difficult to remember them all on the spot. When he stopped for a moment and focused his attention solely on Haruka again, he saw that he was a little overwhelmed, which wasn't odd considering how rapidly Makoto had been rambling. So even if Haruka had told him to come clean about everything, he knew it wasn't quite that simple so he decided to be honest with him.

"And I don't remember exactly every single lie I've told you, but you can ask my anything and I promise I'll answer truthfully," Makoto assured, running his hand through his hair again because he couldn't think of a better solution, "And if you're willing to give me a second chance, then I promise I'll do everything I can to make things up to you, and I will never lie to you ever again."

Haruka gasped at those words, his eyes widening in astonishment, but then he nodded in understanding, staring at his feet as he thought about what he should say to that.
"What… what you said yesterday," he started, like he was hesitant to ask him this, almost afraid to know the truth, "did you mean it?"

Although he hadn't elaborated on what he was referring to, Makoto didn't need him to say any more to understand him. "I meant every last word. And I still do."

Relief visibly engulfed Haruka, bits of his tension leaving him in the form of a small, unintentional sigh. But that wasn't all he wanted to know. "And the kiss… was it your first?"

The fact that this was something that Haruka worried about was incredibly endearing and brought a fond smile to Makoto's face. His voice had been somewhat shy yet he still wanted to ask it, but Makoto understood that, because his heart also desired to be the only one who ever got to experience the wonderful sensation of kissing him. "Yes. It was yours too, right?" he asked just to be sure.

"Yes," Haruka affirmed and for the first time since last night, he smiled too. It was easy to tell that he was very satisfied with that answer. But then his expression turned more serious as he questioned, "Why did you run away?"

There was pain evident in his tone and even though he had tried to conceal it, Makoto still caught it. "Because you called me "Nagisa", and until then I had done everything I could to push reality away and pretend that I wasn't posing as someone else. At that moment there was nothing that was on my mind except you but when you said his name, I could no longer pretend. It burst the bubble that we had been living in, and I realised how much I had been lying to you and that regardless of how much I wanted to, we could never be together. Everything just overwhelmed me and I couldn't take it any longer; I couldn't face your smile knowing that my actions were going to make it disappear very soon. That's why I ran away."

"Are you sure that's all?" Haruka asked out of lingering concern.

"Of course," Makoto confirmed, frowning at Haruka's insecure inquiry. "What else could there be?"

Haruka shrugged in an attempt to come off as nonchalant, but then he said, "Maybe I did something wrong, or you regretted what happened."

"Of course not!" Makoto blurted, "Haru, I could never regret that."

"Me neither," Haruka murmured softly, averting his eyes as he smiled to himself. When he looked up again, their gazes met and held each other and Makoto felt like Haruka was reading him like an open book. He allowed it all, needing Haruka to know that every word he had uttered was genuine and true, that the feelings that had blossomed inside his chest were all his own and not just a part of the perfect illusion they had lived in. After a moment of silence in which their thoughts and emotions were conveyed through the connection of green and blue, Haruka took a deep breath. "Promise you'll never lie to me again?"

That question was asked like it was the last reassurance he needed, and Makoto's heart jumped in elation. But he reminded himself that he wasn't there yet, not until Haruka said so. He put his hand over his heart to try to look as sincere as he possibly could. "I promise," he said solemnly, and he knew that there was no way he could ever break this promise.

"Okay," Haruka replied in acceptance. "Here's your second chance. Don't waste it."

Although his words implied that there would surely be no third chance, an impossibly wide smile
lit up Makoto's face. Things were not mended just yet, but Haruka would give him the chance to do his best to make everything right. And he sure as hell wouldn't waste that chance; he would grasp it with both hands and never let it go. "I won't. Thank you, Haru."

In response Haruka smiled as well before he wrapped his arms around Makoto's neck and Makoto hugged him back immediately, snaking his arms around Haruka's body and holding him tight, never wanting to let him go either.

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto repeated, "Thank you so much." In a rush of emotion and gratitude, Makoto pressed a kiss against his temple.

Haruka simply sighed, moving his head and his nose brushed against Makoto's neck. The way he held him told Makoto that despite his stubbornness from before, he was going to do his best to fix things too.

Eventually Haruka pulled back again, stroking his hands down over Makoto's arms and gently grabbing ahold of his hands. He didn't say a word as he ran his eyes over Makoto's figure, then he snorted lightly.

"I can't believe I didn't notice."

That comment made Makoto chuckle a little. "It's pretty obvious, huh?"

Haruka nodded at that before he elaborated, "You're thin, too thin, your skin is tan, your hands are scarred and calloused - and obviously not just from guitar strings." He turned Makoto's hands around in his, caressing his large palms, and then he snorted again as he looked up at Makoto.

"You can't dance."

"You had no reason to be suspicious, but now that you know it's hard not to see it, right?"

"I had no idea, but now I know it is pretty obvious," Haruka agreed with a small chuckle of his own, "I mean, these garments don't even fit you properly," he continued as he tugged at one of his sleeves for emphasis.

"They're borrowed," Makoto provided, still giggling softly, "You have no idea how constricting they are, especially around my shoulders."

The look in Haruka's eyes told him that he had noticed that, but he resumed speaking without verbally acknowledging Makoto's words, reaching up to cup his cheek in his hand. "You're kind and warm and humble, in ways that no one else is. Your eyes are filled with maturity and wisdom, even though you're still young. You're sweet and caring and determined. That's what gives it away the most."

Makoto leaned into his touch, smiling fondly down at Haruka at the knowledge that despite everything that had happened, he still saw him that way. Then Haruka's hand strayed from his cheek to his chin, grasping it and tilting it downwards. He leaned up on his tippy toes and his other hand came up to brush his fringe away as he placed a chaste kiss upon Makoto's forehead, just between his eyebrows since that was the furthest he could reach. It surprised Makoto, but that didn't stop his smile from softening in adoration.

When Haruka pulled back, the twinkle that was present in his eyes told Makoto that it had been his response to the small kisses Makoto had pressed against his head earlier. He really was too cute.

"Are you alright?" Makoto asked after a second of silence. It was true that Haruka was smiling and making joking remarks and loving gestures again, but he had been really upset before, which was
only natural. It couldn't hurt to make sure he was really okay.

"It's… odd," Haruka admitted as he turned his head away, trying to figure out the best way to phrase his thoughts. "It's a lot to take in, and it does hurt. A lot. But… it hasn't changed my feelings. When I look at you, I feel the same way I did yesterday; I feel the same way you do. And I realised that despite you lying to me, I still want to be beside you because I feel comfortable around you, like I can really be myself with you - as ironic as that sounds. So I want to give you a chance to make things right; to show me who you are without any lies or façades, the real you," he said earnestly with a soft smile, "You might not deserve that chance, and I might get my feelings hurt all over again, but that's a risk I'm willing to take. It's a risk worth taking."

For the umpteenth time that morning, Makoto uttered, "Thank you, Haru," as he wrapped him up into another hug, which made Haruka chuckle, but he still accepted it and buried his face into Makoto's chest. "I'll do my best to never hurt you again. I promise I will."

After all the fear and uncertainty he had felt that night, the feeling of Haruka's lithe body inside his arms was so relieving and reassuring, like everything was finally right in the world again even though that was far from true. Even if it would be absolutely reasonable if Haruka hadn't wanted to give him a second chance, he was so glad that he did and even a thousand kisses wouldn't be enough to express how grateful he was for Haruka's forgiveness. But if he tried to turn their situations around, then he would definitely forgive Haruka as well because he was so dear to him that he could do about anything and Makoto still wouldn't blame him for it; he would still love him regardless of it. So to know that Haruka shared that sentiment made him unbelievably happy.

There was not a fiber in Makoto's being that wanted to let Haruka go, because there was nothing that felt more right than holding him close, feeling him pressed against him in a way that conveyed so much affection. But there had to be some point that they had to let go, and though that was a shame, the thought of all the embraces they could share in the future was a small comfort.

When Makoto pulled back, he ran his hands through Haruka's hair to put it back into place after it had been tousled by his clothing. Then he grabbed Haruka's hand once more.

"Shall we go back to the others? We'll tell you the full story of what happened; I don't even know the full story, so I'm kind of curious," he proposed with a gentle smile.

"Alright," Haruka agreed, "I'm curious as well."

With an exchange of smiles and squeezes in each other's hand, they made their way back inside, back to the throne room where Nagisa, Rei and Kisumi were waiting. They were still seated on the floor when Haruka and Makoto came back, and all conversation stopped immediately as they looked up.

Like a true prince, Haruka cleared his throat before he spoke, "Excuse me for leaving like that."

Nagisa and Kisumi were puzzled by Haruka's sudden calmness after all of the calamity he just experienced, but Rei simply responded with, "It's alright, Your Highness."

Haruka just nodded in acknowledgement before he sat down on the floor as well, naturally making Makoto plop down next to him. "Prince Nagisa," he addressed with a nod of his head, "It's an honour to finally meet you."

"I…" Nagisa stumbled, baffled by Haruka's sudden formality, "No, it's an honour to meet you, Prince Haruka."
Those words made Haruka sigh deeply, and Makoto could see that he was not actually in the mood for formalities, because it was tiring to keep up that act and he had no energy to spare as it was. There was no one around to correct his behaviour anyway and sitting on the floor in the middle of the throne room was not exactly a formal occasion either. "Just Haru is fine," he mumbled before he turned to Rei, "I'm assuming you're Rei?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Rei uttered stiffly with a slight bow and a nod of his head, "Please forgive my rudeness, Your Highness. My name is Rei Ryugazaki, I am Prince Nagisa's tutor. It is an honour to meet you."

"It's fine," Haruka brushed off, but then he looked over at Kisumi. "If you're Nagisa's tutor, then who are you?"

"Me?" Kisumi questioned and he chuckled, "I believe I already introduced myself. I'm Kisumi Shigino, the ambassador and Nagisa's servant."

"I met him the same day you met him," Makoto informed with a smile and for some reason, Haruka seemed to be rather pleased by that.

"Alright," he shrugged, smirking a little to himself, before he turned back to Nagisa, "So, what happened?"

Nagisa let out a puff of air. "Where do I start?"

"I suggest at the beginning," Rei helpfully provided and Nagisa sighed again.

"Of course, it was a rhetorical question," he pouted, but then he cleared his throat and said, "About two weeks ago I heard that I was arranged to marry you, and needless to say I was pretty upset, because I didn't want to marry you - or anyone for that matter. So to distract me a little and take my mind off things, Rei took me to visit the town near the palace. As we were strolling around, I heard something, and when we followed the noise, we got to this square where a boy was singing and playing guitar. That boy was Makoto."

Haruka looked over at Makoto as if to ask if that it was true and Makoto nodded in confirmation, smiling tenderly at him.

"Long story short, we approached him and talked for a while and we became friends. I visited him a couple of more times after that, and he gave me advice about a lot of things, but mainly about our marriage. It was comforting, and even if I still hated the idea of being arranged to marry you, it seemed a little more bearable - it's nothing personal though! Anyway, the night before we were supposed to leave, I felt panicked and constricted, like something was slowly squeezing my throat shut. I knew that the last thing I wanted was to get on the carriage that was supposed to bring me here. So on an impulse, I grabbed a few things, took one of the horses and left," Nagisa concluded, looking over at Rei so he could tell his part.

"That night, I had a strange feeling," Rei continued, adjusting his spectacles on his nose, "I knew how much Prince Nagisa detested the idea of this arrangement and how impulsive he can be, so I decided to check on him. When I got to his chamber he was gone, with nothing but a small note that confirmed that he had run away from his responsibilities. I was honestly not surprised, but I knew that he had just created a huge problem so I had to find him before anyone else noticed he was gone. I searched all around the palace and he was nowhere to be found, so I thought that he might have gone to Makoto since he was really the only person outside the palace who Nagisa knew. But when I got to his house, Nagisa wasn't there either so I did the unthinkable: I asked Makoto to do this, to come here in Nagisa's stead and pretend he was the prince of Sano. Of course,
he refused at first but after pressing for some time, he reluctantly agreed."

Makoto noticed that Rei had purposefully let out the reason for his agreement to this plan, most likely since he didn't want to embarrass him in front of the others. Although it really didn't matter since everyone here already knew about his financial situation, he appreciated Rei's thoughtfulness nonetheless.

"So we left a note for his family and we went back to the palace, where I woke Sir Kisumi and asked if he would be willing to go along with this as well, and after that we did our best to prepare Makoto for this plan. Unfortunately we didn't have much time on our hands, but considering he didn't immediately stand out as an imposter, I suppose we did a pretty good job."

"That wasn't what you said back then," Kisumi objected, sounding like he was still a little offended by the comment Rei made about his suit.

"I didn't say we didn't do a good job," Rei argued, "I just said that the suit was not exactly one that a prince would wear. Which it isn't."

"Well excuse me, I can't help it either that I don't wear garments befitting of a prince. I am but a humble servant, after all," Kisumi mocked, but the look in his eyes and the hints of a smirk made it obvious that he was purposely challenging Rei. "It's not like your suits would have been any better."

"My suits are perfectly fitting for the job I have and the role I portray," Rei defended, Kisumi's playfulness completely going over his head, "Unfortunately, Makoto is too tall to wear one of Prince Nagisa's suits or one of mine; even your suits didn't really fit him and we couldn't have possibly sent him here in his own clothes!"

Haruka rolled his eyes as Rei and Kisumi bickered, making Makoto chuckle lightly. "And then?" Haruka interrupted, his sharp voice cutting through their conversation.

That made Rei clear his throat, adjusting his spectacles once more in a nervous habit. "Then I told him some basic etiquette and sent him and Sir Kisumi off." Rei looked over at Kisumi as if to tell him that it was his turn to relay his part of the story now, but Kisumi merely shrugged.

"Then we got here," he said, but he couldn't help but tease Haruka a little, "You two met, fell in love, you found out he wasn't actually Nagisa, and now we're sitting here."

Those words made Haruka blush fiercely and he averted his eyes, and even Makoto could feel his cheeks growing slightly warmer at Kisumi's blunt statement of their affection for each other; it was true, but it still felt weird to hear him openly declare their love for each other when they hadn't even done that yet.

"Why did you even agree to this?" Haruka retorted in an attempt to divert the attention away from himself.

"I didn't want to at first," Kisumi lied, "But when a guy as handsome as Makoto asks you a favour, it's really hard to say no. Especially when those pretty eyes plead to you so desperately. It was an unfair persuasion," he finished with a sigh.

"Don't tease him like that!" Makoto scolded, frowning at Kisumi's joking remarks. In the short time they spent together, Makoto had learned that Haruka was rather jealous - which was incredibly adorable - so he could very well imagine that he didn't appreciate those type of flirtatious comments. When he looked over at Haruka, his suspicions were confirmed: his beautiful face was
contorted in annoyance and he was glaring like he was mentally shooting daggers at Kisumi. If Haruka hadn't thought that Kisumi was a nuisance before, then he was slowly getting himself there with every word that left his mouth. Haruka might really prosecute him if he kept at it with these jokes. "Haru, he's lying so don't mind what he says."

"It was just a joke!"

"I think Prince Haruka has been through enough today. He doesn't need your jokes on top of that," Rei stated in a disapproving manner.

Kisumi held up his hands. "Hey, I was just trying to lighten up the mood. The real reason is that I was already appointed to escort Nagisa here, and when Rei asked me to do this, I agreed. It wasn't like anyone else would be crazy enough to agree to this."

"Does that mean you are crazy?" Nagisa giggled and Makoto could even see the corners of Haruka's mouth curl up in a tiny smirk.

"I suppose it does," Kisumi shrugged with a grin.

"More importantly, Rei," Makoto said in order to get back to the main topic instead of the nonsense they had been talking about just now, "How did you find Nagisa?"

"Honestly, it wasn't hard at all," Rei sighed, sounding like he was relieved he had found Nagisa yet still annoyed by him leaving in the first place, "It seems like there aren't many blond boys in expensive clothing wandering around the streets with a horse and who have no concept of the value of things."

Nagisa laughed sheepishly at that description of himself, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck.

"Unfortunately, it still took a while before I could actually go look for him. The next morning I planned to go look for him immediately, but I suddenly got loaded with a bunch of other tasks that I needed to take care of. Since everyone thought that Prince Nagisa was here in Iwatobi, there was nothing else that I had to be doing, so first I had to finish all that needed to be taken care of as quickly as I could. When everything was done I went out and since I know that Prince Nagisa is a rather… uncommon appearance in the general street view, I knew he would stand out so I thought the best course of action was to ask around if anyone had seen him. No one could remember him by the description I gave of him, but oddly enough some money was able to clear up their memory," Rei scoffed in clear irritation, "Usually I don't engage myself with folk like that but considering the haste I was in, I felt like I had no other choice."

"You probably asked the wrong people," Makoto added, because he knew many folk from his errands and they were always kind and tried their best to be helpful. On the other hand, some might have seen Rei as a rich person and thought they could easily earn some by answering his questions. Although it was not something he would have done himself, Makoto honestly couldn't blame them for it when it seemed like Rei had more than enough money to spare while they had to be mindful of every coin they had.

"Either way," Rei continued with another sigh, most likely still a bit irked, "After receiving some useful information and directions I found Prince Nagisa at an inn a couple of towns away. Besides being swindled by some merchants, he was alright, but he refused to come with me at first. It wasn't until I explained that you, Makoto, were sent in his place that he agreed to come. So we got onto the carriage and came here as fast as possible.

"We arrived just before midnight, but it took a lot of convincing for the gatekeepers to let us in. In
their eyes, we were the imposters since they thought Makoto was Prince Nagisa and he was already here. It wasn't until Nagisa showed them the ring with his family's crest - which he was thankfully still wearing when he left - that they let us in, and then we had to give the whole explanation again to the captain of the guard. It took quite some time, and when he finally believed us, he ordered for his subordinates to apprehend you and Sir Kisumi since you were criminals. We tried to stop them and explain that we knew you but he wouldn't listen."

"It's alright," Makoto uttered, knowing it wasn't Rei nor Nagisa's fault that they were apprehended.

"What did they do to you?" Haruka asked with the same concern that he had before lacing his voice, "They weren't rough, were they?"

"They weren't," Makoto affirmed, "I was in my room when they apprehended me, and after all that had happened last night, I thought you had found out that I wasn't Nagisa and that you therefore ordered for them to throw me in the dungeon."

"I would never do that!" Haruka hastily exclaimed, but then he lowered his voice again, "Not without speaking to you first."

"I know that now, but I thought you were mad at me."

"I wasn't mad," Haruka denied with a shake of his head, "I was… hurt."

"Haru," Makoto sighed, putting his hand over Haruka's and squeezing softly, "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry for assuming things, but I'm even more sorry for hurting you."

"It's okay," Haruka muttered as he stroked his thumb over the back of Makoto's hand, "I know you didn't mean it that way. I'm just glad that everything is sorted out now."

Makoto smiled softly. "So am I."

"And then?"

Rei's voice snapped him out of his trance. Not that Makoto could help it; it was just so easy to get lost in Haruka, even when there were others around.

"Sorry," he mumbled awkwardly before he continued, "They shackled my wrists together and since I didn't resist, they weren't unnecessarily rough. They led me to the dungeon, put me in one of the cells, unshackled me and closed the door. That was it. It wasn't until some time later that they brought in Kisumi."

"Well, they did handle me roughly," Kisumi stated.

"You probably deserved it," Haruka sneered in return to the remarks Kisumi had made to him earlier.

"Haru!" Makoto chided and Haruka averted his eyes with a pout.

"Anyway," Kisumi resumed as if nothing had happened, "I was on my way to my room after having some drinks with some of the other staff, and when I got there, four guards were waiting for me. Four. I asked them what was wrong but they didn't answer and just grabbed me. So obviously, since I had no idea what was going on, I resisted and tried to break their hold on me so we could have a civilised conversation, but they wouldn't listen. Took me to the dungeon and when I saw Makoto already there, I also assumed that Prince Haruka had found out and ordered for us to be apprehended."
"See, you did deserve it," Haruka commented.

"Haru!" Makoto repeated with a frown, but Rei merely shook his head at him.

"Actually, he's right. Why did you even resist when you knew this would happen at one point or another?"

"Are you also turning on me now?" Kisumi gasped in feigned offense.

"And standing up against four guards all by yourself is a pretty dumb thing to do," Nagisa added.

"Running away from home is also a pretty dumb thing to do," Kisumi retorted, but before Nagisa could respond to that, Makoto interrupted.

"That's enough!"

"I guess it was a pretty dumb thing to do," Kisumi admitted after a short pause, "but they just startled me, okay?"

"It's not like it matters now," Rei concluded, "It's not like they inflicted any physical damage nor scarred you for life. The guards were merely doing as they were told."

"Well, I guess you're right, but that doesn't mean that it didn't hurt!"

"Anyway," Makoto sighed, not wanting to linger on this any longer, "Haru, how did you find out about us being in the dungeon?"

"Well, this morning one of the maids served me my breakfast, but I sent her away because I didn't have an appetite," Haruka began, "She left, but she returned a little while later. I tried to send her away again, but she was panicked and told me that you weren't in your room. Honestly, that really scared me and I left my room to go look for you. When I got here, I saw the captain of the guard with Nagisa and Rei, but since I was too preoccupied with where you were, I didn't ask about them. When he told me he locked you in the dungeon, I immediately ordered for him to bring you here without even asking why he locked you up in the first place. It wasn't until you were all sitting in front of me that I realised there must be a connection somehow."

"I see, I'm sorry for worrying you," Makoto apologised, giving Haruka's delicate hand another small squeeze. He could only begin to imagine how Haruka must have felt when he thought he had left, especially after what happened yesterday evening, so a new wave of guilt washed over him.

"It's okay," Haruka assured, "It's not your fault."

For the first time in a while, it was quiet for a good minute as they all tried to gather their thoughts and figure out where to go from here. But then Rei nudged Nagisa with his elbow.

"Isn't there something you should say?"

"I know!" Nagisa grumbled, but then he looked up and started softly, "Makoto, I'm so sorry that you had to do all of this. That really wasn't my intention when I left."

"It's alright," Makoto said with a smile, "I really don't regret agreeing to this. On the contrary, I'm actually quite glad that you ran away, otherwise I never would have met Haru."

"Makoto…" Haruka sighed, but Makoto's smile only softened as he looked at him.

"So, thank you, Nagisa."
"Still…" Nagisa mumbled, his voice full of guilt, but then the determination returned to him and he continued, "But, even if I'm sorry, I don't regret running away either. It wasn't my intention for you to go here, but I still stand by my choice. Because I don't want to marry you, Haru. It's nothing personal, really, but… you see, the truth is that I… I'm in love with Rei."

"Your Highness!" Rei gasped in perplexity, "What are you saying?!"

"I love you, Rei, you know I do," Nagisa confessed, "And you love me too, right?"

Rei bit his lip and turned his face away from Nagisa. "What I feel does not matter. Some things are simply impossible and us being together is one of those things."

"It doesn't have to be!" he insisted, trying to convince him with every ounce of his strength, "We could run away together and-"

"Your Highness, you mustn't say things like that," Rei interrupted sternly, though the pain was easily bleeding through his voice. "You have had your try at running away and you see how that ended. It's time for you to grow up and realise that some things are simply not meant to be."

"But Rei…” Nagisa whimpered as his eyes began to fill with tears.

"You are arranged to marry Prince Haruka. You have to accept that."

"Your parents only care about the benefits that come with the arrangement, right?" Haruka suddenly asked, startling both Nagisa and Rei who had been so caught up in each other that they forgot the others.

"Well," Nagisa sniffed, "They also quite like the idea of me marrying a king-to-be, but when it comes down to it, the benefits of the bond between our kingdoms is their main priority."

"What if I can arrange for those benefits to pass even without the marriage? Would that appease your parents?"

"I-I think," Nagisa mumbled, "Would you be able to do that?"

"Like you said, I am the king-to-be. I'm sure I can pull some strings," Haruka confirmed."

"Would you do that for me?" Nagisa questioned in disbelief.

"It's not for you," Haruka stated, but Makoto could tell that that wasn't the full truth, "I don't want to marry you either. If that's how I can get your parents to cancel the arrangement, then I'll gladly do it."

A bright smile lit up Nagisa's face. "Thank you, Haru!" he gushed, but soon his smile faltered. "But, then they'll just marry me off to someone else. I don't want that either."

"Maybe you can marry each other just for the public eye," Kisumi suggested, "Get married and just have your own relationships in secret."

"No," Haruka immediately shut down. "I don't want to live like that. I don't want to hide myself or my partner from the people."

Although Haruka's words were vague and they still had a long way to go from here, Makoto knew he was referring to him and their relationship and it made his heart melt with fondness and joy.

Kisumi held his hands up in defense. "It was just a suggestion."
"What are we going to do?" Nagisa sighed, his voice filled with despair.

It was silent for another moment as they all thought. Just like he had at the start of this plan, Makoto felt so bad for Nagisa and Rei, even more so than back then because now, he really understood how they felt because he had found someone who he loved just like they loved each other. He knew for sure that if he were in Nagisa's shoes, he'd do the same thing because he would do anything he could to be with the person he loved. Although their situations were similar now, it was still different: Haruka and he were the crown prince and a commoner, but Nagisa and Rei were the prince and a servant, and although neither of those combinations were commonly accepted, it was just not the same. Besides, Makoto knew that he and Haruka were both willing to do everything they could to be together, but it was different for Rei.

It wasn't that his love for Nagisa wasn't true, but he had a different mindset than Makoto. He was raised with rules and protocol and rather than doing what he and Nagisa both wanted, he would do what he thought was best for Nagisa. Even if it made him miserable, he would stay on the sidelines where he thought he belonged and send off the person he loved most to fulfill the duty he was put on earth for. He would maintain the appropriate distance between himself and Nagisa because that was proper, while Nagisa had done everything he could to tear down the wall that separated them.

Rei was raised to think; Makoto was raised to feel. And while Nagisa and Haruka were also raised to think, they chose to listen to their hearts and wanted to choose for their own happiness, while Rei chose to be the voice of reason and lock away his own feelings for what he assumed to be the greater good. In that aspect Rei was being selfless, but Makoto thought that there was nothing wrong with being a little selfish sometimes, especially not when things mattered as much as they did now.

Both Makoto and Nagisa had fantasized about them switching places for real, and honestly, that would make everything so much easier. It would make all of their problems disappear. Then the arrangement would just go through as planned, and Rei and Nagisa could be together without anything standing in their way. Unfortunately, that could never happen and things would never be that easy.

But there had to be some way. Some way all of this could be resolved and they would all be happy. Now they just had to find that way, and if they couldn't find it, then they had to make a way.

Those were the determined thoughts that coursed through Makoto's head, but he had absolutely no idea what to do or where to start. He had never had to deal with situations like this before so it wasn't like he had experience with delivering happily ever afters, but he supposed that the others could relate to that as well.

No matter how hard he pondered, Makoto could not come up with the solution to their problems. He was getting pretty desperate, because Nagisa was on the verge of tears and the longer the silence lingered, the closer they got to spilling over. After already having made Haruka cry today, the last thing he wanted was for Nagisa to cry as well.

Then suddenly, the silence was disrupted when Haruka spoke, "What if I can make you being allowed to marry Rei a term of the agreement?"

"You can do that?" Nagisa asked hopefully, his eyes widening as he looked back from Rei to Haruka.

"I can't promise anything, but I can try," Haruka offered.

An enormous smile stretched Nagisa's face and he exclaimed, "Thank you!" and he was about to
jump Haruka in enthusiasm and gratitude, but then he realised that he forgot something important, and the smile soon vanished as he turned back to Rei. "If Haru can arrange that, would you accept it, Rei?"

"W-Well," Rei stumbled, the question overwhelming him and he didn't really know how to respond, "I suppose… if Prince Haruka can arrange that and the king and queen agree… then I have no objections."

When Nagisa processed those words, the wide smile resurfaced and he yelled, "Rei!" as he tackled him, making them both fall flat onto the floor.

"Your Highness!" Rei yelped in surprise, "There are others around!" But Nagisa didn't listen to him as he tightened his arms around his neck and roughly pressed his lips against Rei's.

It was not the perfect and beautiful first kiss that Rei always dreamed of. It wasn't the soft and slow and sweet pressure of lips meeting each other like the sea and the shore; it was rather harsh, their teeth knocked together with impact, they were lying in the middle of a throne room, surrounded by others, and it probably would have been unpleasant if it were anyone else pressed against him. But since it was Nagisa, it was even better than he ever could have imagined. So, for the first time in his life, Rei allowed himself to let go of all control and he forgot everything as he wrapped his arms around Nagisa's body and kissed him back.

The scene made Makoto smile and when he looked over at Haruka, he saw a tiny smile on his handsome face as well. That proved even more that Haruka's offers had not been selfish ones that just so happened to benefit Nagisa and Rei as well; after all, he would have no added gain of Nagisa being allowed to marry Rei, but he would still go out of his way to try to make it possible for them. Even though he barely even knew them. That showed just how kind Haruka really was, and it made Makoto's heart sigh with fondness.

"Thank you, Haru," he whispered so he wouldn't disturb Nagisa and Rei's moment, and in response, Haruka squeezed his hand and his smile softened as their eyes met.

Kisumi, on the other hand, couldn't hold back his laughter; after watching them pining after each other for such a long time, to finally see them getting somewhere was incredibly pleasing to him and he was really happy for them. It wasn't his intention to break their spell, but he couldn't help it.

Nagisa pulled back with a wide smile while Rei was blushing brightly, adjusting his spectacles once more after Nagisa had knocked them askew on his face, obviously very flustered. He cleared his throat as he tried to regain his composure, but it wasn't quite working.

"Haru, thank you," Nagisa expressed as he wrapped his arms around Haruka's neck as well.

This gesture startled Haruka and he was visibly uncomfortable, not knowing what he should do, so he settled with patting Nagisa's back lightly. "Again, I can't promise anything," he stressed, "I'll try my best but I can't guarantee that they'll agree."

"I know, but thank you anyway," Nagisa beamed and he let Haruka go again, "I'll do my best to persuade them as well."

Although Nagisa was overjoyed, Rei wasn't fully convinced yet. "Is it really okay?" he questioned cautiously, which wasn't odd considering it went against everything he had been taught and living by up until just now. Even if he had been aware of their mutual feelings for a long time, he had never intended to do something about them because he thought it could never work out anyway. He had always rejected Nagisa's subtle and not-so-subtle advances, not because he wanted to reject
them, but because he saw no other option. He knew that one day, Nagisa would be married off and therefore he kept his distance, because the thought of inevitably losing him after finally having him was absolutely unbearable. In order to spare them both of the immense pain that their separation would cause, Rei never allowed himself to be persuaded by his traitorous heart.

Though that never stopped Nagisa from trying again and again, because he knew that his feelings were reciprocated. Even if the future was never really on his mind and the thoughts of marriage seemed so far away for so long, he thought that having Rei for only a little while was better than never having him at all.

For years they had played this game and now it had come to an unexpected end; a twist that had never been a part of Rei's careful calculations. So he was hesitant, for it just seemed too easy; after years of seeing his happiness running away from him, forever out of his grasp, it was now not only within reach, but seemingly served to him on a silver platter. There had to be something wrong, because things were never this easy.

"Of course!" Kisumi immediately chimed in, and Haruka nodded in agreement.

"Rei, regardless of all the circumstances," Makoto said, wanting to find a way to make Rei's heart speak for him for once rather than his brain, "If there was no status, no classes, no titles, would you want to be together with Nagisa?"

It took a second before Rei spoke, though it wasn't because he didn't know the answer to that question, but rather because he was debating with himself whether or not to admit the truth, even to himself. He took a deep breath before he clearly stated, "Yes."

The pause had made Nagisa nervous, but when he heard his reply, the smile returned, although it was a lot smaller and more contained now.

"Then why do you let those things hold you back now?" Makoto inquired, seeking to explain himself in a way that would get through to Rei. "For all of your life, you have followed every rule and protocol. You always did what was expected of you, you made every decision with your head rather than your heart and while that made you content with yourself, it didn't make you happy, did it?" When Rei shook his head as he stared at his lap, Makoto continued, "You are allowed to be happy, Rei. Even if it's not "proper", even if it's not what everyone expects of you, you're allowed to let your heart decide for you every once in a while, especially when it's important. That doesn't make you selfish or a bad person, it makes you human. It's alright to put your own feelings first sometimes rather than ignoring them because you think it's the right thing to do. You're allowed to value your own happiness above everything else."

"And your happiness lies with Nagisa, right?" Kisumi asked, already knowing the answer to that question.

"Yes, it does," Rei admitted, and Kisumi smiled in response.

"I think we all know that Nagisa feels the same way. This is something both of your hearts desire, but in your situation simply desiring is not enough. You both have to fight to make things work and you have to do everything you can to defy fate and do the impossible," he declared, once more gesticulating while he talked, "And if you don't think it's worth to fight for your own happiness, then fight for Nagisa's because that ultimately leads to the same outcome."

Kisumi's words seemingly struck something in Rei as well, and he looked up to meet all of their gazes. "Thank you," he muttered, his purple eyes shining with resolve and a hint of oncoming tears, "I'll do my best."
At the confirmation that Rei was actively choosing for a future with him, Nagisa sighed as he grabbed Rei's hand, which made Rei smile shyly at him.

It wasn't like Makoto didn't understand the power of Kisumi's words - although he had said his fair share of motivational things to Rei as well, he was mainly crediting Kisumi - because they had impacted him in the same way just hours earlier. What it was about the things Kisumi said that was able to give strength and hope, Makoto didn't know, but he made it seem like everything else was trivial in comparison to your heart's desire. And Rei had probably realised that that was indeed the case; everything else was trivial compared to what Nagisa meant to him, and with the encouragement of everyone present, he made the decision to fight for his own happiness rather than accept the current of life without resistance.

Even if it wasn't sure if Haruka could arrange for this to be possible, Makoto dearly hoped that it would be because he wanted Nagisa and Rei to be happy together. They deserved it.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Rei said sincerely as he bowed to Haruka once more.

Startled by this, Haruka looked away and mumbled, "Just Haru is fine."

"Then, Prince Haruka," Rei stated, not feeling comfortable with completely removing Haruka's title and settling for this as a compromise.

Another moment of silence fell between them, and without realising what he was doing, Makoto's eyes naturally drifted back to Haruka, to his beautiful eyes and his content smile, to their hands that still held onto each other because neither of them had wanted to pull away first, and the butterflies were back, buzzing with more affection and adoration than they ever had before. He was so lucky; so lucky that this all-around wonderful person was interested in him too and that he wanted to give him a second chance after everything he had done to him. And for that, Makoto would be eternally grateful.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by a light laugh. Pulled from his wandering thoughts, Makoto looked over at Kisumi, who was chuckling merrily like someone had just told him a great joke.

"What?" Haruka questioned, sounding mildly annoyed because he was assumingly pulled from his thoughts as well.

"It's just," Kisumi giggled, "When you think about it, it's funny. Nagisa ran away because he didn't want to marry Prince Haruka, then Rei, the guy Nagisa actually wants to marry, hired Makoto to pretend he was Nagisa, and he did actually fall in love with Prince Haruka and vice versa. What are the odds of that?"

"Well, I suppose it's a bit strange when you put it like that," Rei thought, "But it's not like I asked Makoto to do this with the intention of him falling in love with Prince Haruka, and I'm pretty sure he didn't expect this either."

"I didn't," Makoto confirmed, "The thought honestly never crossed my mind. Not until I saw Haru, at least."

"I didn't expect it either. All this time I was preparing myself to hate Princess Nagisa, so I was really surprised when."

"Wait," Nagisa interrupted with a frown, "Princess Nagisa?"

"Hm," Haruka hummed, "My parents made the arrangement thinking you were a girl. They probably confused you with one of your sisters. So you can imagine how surprised I was the first
time I saw Makoto- or "Prince Nagisa"," he snorted, making quotation marks with his fingers as he spoke, "And I was even more surprised when I saw how kind he was; he was literally the opposite of everything I expected "Nagisa" to be. So I guess it all went downhill from there."

That remark made Makoto giggle as well. "I'm glad it did. I wouldn't want you to hate me, though I guess it's not applicable because I'm not actually Nagisa after all."

"Well, the last thing I expected when I talked to you about the arrangement and Prince Haruka was for you to go in my place," Nagisa said, thinking back at the times they spent sitting side by side at the town square, discussing the future, "Let alone for you to actually fall in love with him."

"Same for me," Makoto chuckled, "I wanted to do everything I could to help you but this was not exactly the way I had in mind. But I really don't dislike this turn of events, on the contrary, I really wouldn't have wanted to miss this." With a smile he faced Haruka, who mirrored his expression and gently squeezed his hand once more.

"But," Rei uttered, sounding hesitant to speak his mind, "What are you going to do?"

Makoto didn't need any more words to know he was referring to their relationship and possible future together, and he had honestly not thought about it before Rei brought it up. It was dumb of him, but after being so relieved that Haruka was willing to give him a second chance, he really hadn't thought about what would come next. Suddenly, his heart sank in his chest, pulled down by the weight of uncertainty.

However, Haruka seemed to have thought about it and he shrugged. "We'll figure something out when the time comes. For now, we just want to take it slow and get to know each other better."

Although they hadn't discussed it with that many words, Makoto wholeheartedly agreed. After all, he still had to do his best to gain back Haruka's trust and that took time, and he really wanted to give his all and make sure this was what they both wanted and that they were fully on the same page before they rushed into anything. So for now, they would just see what happened next and go with the flow of life. Haruka's words bid him comfort, even if only for now.

When he really thought about it, it was still odd; he, an ordinary boy, a commoner like countless of others, had somehow managed to not only get himself close to a crown prince and fall in love with him, but made that very same prince return his affections. Perhaps his life was really like a story, just like Kisumi said, because this whole situation was so weird, with coincidence after coincidence bringing him where he was now. It was a strangely amusing plan, and although Haruka had unintentionally become the victim of it all, it had brought along so many wonderful things that Makoto wouldn't trade for the world.

If he had been running an errand on that one specific day, none of this would have even happened. If there was a stranger with a job to do at that particular moment, then he never would have been playing guitar at the town square when Nagisa and Rei happened to pass by. In that sense, someone who was completely uninvolved and unbeknown could have changed everything in not only his life, but in all of theirs. Hell, if there was no economic crisis in Sano, then he would have been working in his father's shop right now, just like he did before and wouldn't have had to resort to running errands and making music in the first place. One tiny alteration could make the difference between him meeting the most amazing person in his life, and him living his life without ever bidding the crown prince of Iwatobi a second thought.

But even if he wanted to find a stable source of income for every day so he could support his family, he was so glad that he wasn't able to find anything to do that specific afternoon or he would have missed out on the greatest experience of his life; not finding a job had been life-changing in
every sense of the word.

That train of thought was abruptly halted when it reminded him of something. His family.

"Rei," Makoto suddenly yelped, a thousand and one worries shooting through his head, "Did you go to my family?" Images of his parents and Ran and Ren, worried and hungry without his part of the household income, not knowing what to do or what happened to him, all of it played through his mind and took his breath away, but not in a good way; it knocked the wind out of him like a punch in his gut.

"I did," Rei affirmed calmly, trying to soothe his concerns, "Going to your family was the first thing I did that morning to deliver what I promised."

A sigh of relief escaped through Makoto's lips. At least they hadn't run into any financial issues with him being gone. But that was only part of his concern. "Were they worried?"

Rei hesitated before he answered, "A little, yes."

That was enough for Makoto to know the truth. Knowing his family, they were sick with worry but Rei didn't want to say that to prevent him from getting worried about them as well. Despite the reward that he got for them, immense guilt washed over him again at the knowledge that he did this to them, that he had left them without a proper explanation.

When Haruka read the emotions that were written across his face, he spoke up. "We have to go immediately."

"To Sano?" Nagisa questioned in disbelief. When Haruka nodded and pushed himself of the floor, naturally pulling Makoto up with him, Nagisa frowned. "But we just got here!"

Haruka clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Do you want me to talk to your parents or not?" he snapped.

"Yes! Yes, of course!" Nagisa quickly blurted, afraid that he had said something wrong and that Haruka would come back on his words from before if he offended him in one way or another.

"Well I'm going to have to go to Sano for that, don't I?"

"Oh," he mumbled unintelligently, relieved that his previous concerns were unnecessary and that Haruka's question wasn't a threat, "Of course. Sorry."

"Besides, Makoto has to go to his family," Haruka added a little softer, and his tone betrayed that that was the real reason he wanted to go to Sano. "You can stay here if you want but we're going."

"I'll go too!" Nagisa exclaimed as he got up as well, "I was just hoping that maybe, we could get breakfast first?"

"Lunch," Rei corrected as he checked his pocket watch.

"You haven't had breakfast yet?" Haruka asked in disbelief, and when Nagisa and Rei both shook their heads, he turned to Makoto. "Were you served breakfast?"

Makoto shook his head as well, and Kisumi responded, "No. I thought we were getting breakfast earlier but they only came to take us here since you told them to."

Again Haruka clicked his tongue before he sighed deeply. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience and
rudeness of the guards. That's not the way we normally do things around here, so I'll be sure to reprimand them later," Haruka muttered, "I suppose we'll have brunch first, then. Is that alright?"

"Of course," Makoto assured with a gentle smile. He really appreciated Haruka's thoughtfulness and considerateness and though he dearly wanted to go back to see his family, he could definitely wait until they all had a meal first. After all, he knew how it felt to be hungry while none of the others had most likely ever experienced it before, and he wanted to save them that experience since it was not a particularly pleasant one to have.

Haruka led them to the dining room, where he told everyone to take a seat. He called over one of the servants, and a rather old man approached them.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Please ask the cooks to make us some brunch and make sure a coach is prepared."

"Certainly, Your Highness," the servant said, "Are you planning to go somewhere?"

"To Sano," Haruka confirmed, thinking about what else he needed, "Please ask some maids to fill up a suitcase with necessities."

"When are you going?" the man asked in bewilderment.

"Today."

"Today? How long do you plan to stay?"

Haruka shrugged, "I'm not sure yet."

"But Your Highness!" the servant exclaimed in distress, "What kind of impromptu business do you have in Sano?"

"Personal business," Haruka dismissed, making it clear that he didn't want to go further into detail.

"What about your parents, do they know you're going?"

"No," Haruka simply stated, "They'll see when they return."

"But-"

"I am an adult, I can take care of myself," Haruka interrupted sternly, "It's not like they ever inform me of their impromptu trips, so I don't see why I would have to announce it or ask for permission."

"Well-" the old man stumbled, not wanting to go against the prince's authority but needing to voice his concerns all the same, "Who are you taking with you?"

"Them." Haruka gestured to the rest of them seated at the table.

"You're not taking someone from the staff?"

"I don't know why I would need to take anyone," Haruka brushed off.

"Well, what if something happens to you? At least take a guard along with you!" the man pressed.

For the third time in a short while, Haruka clicked his tongue in irritation. "Fine," he gave in, knowing that protest would be futile since it was customary for members of royal families to take
guards when they went somewhere, but he was sure there were guards at the palace of Sano and outside of that, he wanted to be incognito. He highly doubted that anyone in Sano would even know that he was the prince of Iwatobi and taking an entourage of guards with him would only draw more attention to himself. It wasn't like anything would happen, but he complied if only to get his staff off his back. "Tell Yamazaki to get ready for a trip abroad. Anything else?"

"Oh uh, no, Your Highness," the servant stuttered, surprised by Haruka's sudden agreement, "Of course, I'll make sure everything will be taken care of and brunch will be served swiftly."

"Thank you," Haruka uttered, but it was certainly not the most sincere thing he had ever said, clearly still irked by the man's insistent concern.

Once the man was gone, Haruka sighed again and Makoto wanted to do his best to light up the mood after the semi-argument Haruka had with the butler.

"Is Yamazaki your friend?" he asked, genuinely curious and interested in getting to know everything about Haruka.

At that question, Haruka actually snorted loudly. "No," he said, his voice full of amusement, "I'm pretty sure he hates me."

"Oh," Makoto said in confusion, furrowing his eyebrows, "Then why did you ask for him to come?"

"Because he hates me," Haruka provided, and that only confused him more. He didn't understand why Haruka would purposely bring someone he didn't have a good bond with when he was free to choose whomever he pleased. As always, Haruka didn't need him to voice his questions to understand them. "Yamazaki doesn't care about me at all. He doesn't care about what I do, so he won't interfere with whatever I want to do or wherever I want to go as long as he will still be able to do his job, which is keeping me safe. And since there are no active threats nor is anything going to happen anyway, that means that he isn't going to stop me from doing anything, as opposed to someone who actually cares about me and my well-being, or my status and things that are inappropriate for me to do. That's why bringing him is the best option."

Makoto nodded in understanding, seeing why that made sense. He hadn't really thought about what the presence of a guard would entail, but now that Haruka explained his reasoning, his selfish heart decided that he preferred it this way as well.

"Aren't you afraid that he's going to be mean or purposely ruin your time with Makoto?" Nagisa asked, not as convinced by Haruka's explanation as Makoto was.

"No, he won't do that," Haruka assured with confidence, "He's not the type to do that; he's more of the quiet, brooding type. It's not like he hates me with a fiery passion either, I suppose saying that he rather dislikes me is more accurate. Though that is entirely mutual."

"Is Sir Yamazaki a guard?" Rei wondered.

"Yes. He's aspiring to become a knight though, so even if he was the type to go out of his way to ruin other people's lives, he wouldn't be dumb enough to waste his chances at ever being knighted by presenting himself that immaturely in front of me."

Then the servants came with their food and conversation was halted as plates were put in front of their noses. Only when they were left to themselves again did conversation resume.

"Do you think he'll ever be knighted?" Nagisa muttered with his mouth full, not having waited a
"Your Highness!" Rei shrieked out of habit, "Mind your manners!"

"Sorry."

"It's fine," Haruka brushed off, "I'm sure he will. I may not like him, but he's been working hard for it and I do acknowledge that. But I'm not that well-acquainted with him, so if you have any other questions then you're going to have to wait to ask him yourself instead. We're going to have a long way to go to Sano, so you can ask him when we're on the coach."

"Actually, Prince Haruka, we won't be on the carriage with him, nor with you," Rei informed.

"No?"

"No. Nagisa and I came here with my carriage and I'm going to have to take that back with us."

"Ah, of course," Haruka mumbled, but then he turned to Makoto, "You will be going with me, right?"

"Of course," Makoto echoed, smiling softly at him. The road back to Sano was a long one and it seemed like the perfect opportunity to talk with him some more.

"On that note," Rei said, "Are you sure we'll be able to leave today? It takes about seventeen hours to get from here to the palace of Sano; we had been preparing for the trip for days."

"You're right, but this time we're not exactly going for an arranged official meeting; the servants don't know why we're going, so I think we'll be able to leave soon," Haruka stated.

Rei nodded in confirmation. "I think we're all tired but I suggest not going to sleep while we wait until we can leave, considering that the majority of the trip will take place during the night. We don't want to disturb our natural rhythm."

"Not even you?" Haruka countered, "You're going to be the coachman for the night, are you sure you're going to manage?"

"I'll be the coachman," Kisumi volunteered, holding up his hand, "I think I'm the only one who got a little bit of sleep last night so I'll just take a nap after this and I should be good to go all night. It's not like I've got anything important to do when we get to Sano anyway."

"Alright, thank you," Rei uttered, nodding again but this time in gratitude.

"Will we be taking a coachman?" Makoto asked, and Haruka shook his head in response.

"Yamazaki can play for coachman too," Haruka thought, "If he wants to be a knight then he needs to get used to the fact that he will have to be up and alert at night, build up some endurance and sleep-deprivation can be a part of that. It's good training."

Although Haruka definitely had a point, Makoto still thought it would be a little cruel to make him stay awake for that long, especially since he couldn't sleep when they got to Sano either because he had to do his job. He had no idea what kind of hardships knights had to go through during their training, but not sleeping for extensive periods of time couldn't be very beneficial to the body.

When Haruka read the concern that was written across his face, he quickly continued, "But since I'm not very eager for him to get us killed on the way there, I'll tell someone to tell him to get some
rest before we leave."

Makoto smiled again, amused by Haruka's unsuccessful attempt at being subtle. "Thanks, Haru."

After brunch Kisumi excused himself to go back to his guest room so he could take a nap, and Makoto went to his room as well. Considering the fact that he hadn't been able to take a shower yesterday evening nor this morning and was still wearing the clothes from the day before, he would do that now before they left to go back to Sano. He didn't know when the next time he got access to a bathroom like this one would be - if there would even be another time - so he wanted to make most of it while he still could.

Haruka assigned Nagisa and Rei guest rooms too so they could freshen themselves up if they wished to do so and they thanked him for his hospitality. Since they were in the rooms right next to Makoto's, they agreed to meet up in Makoto's room when they were done so they could start packing his - Kisumi's - stuff. With that, they all went their separate ways.

The hot bath that Makoto had longed for was incredibly relaxing and just what he had needed. Although he still desired to be by Haruka's side as much as he could, taking a step back to have some time for themselves was what they had probably both needed. They had gone through a lot these past few hours, Haruka especially, so having a minute to breathe and process everything in silence and solitude was generally appreciated. But even if unwinding and not having to think or do anything for a while was very enjoyable and pleasing, Makoto still looked forward to being reunited with Haruka again when they were both done.

It seemed like his bath may have been a little too relaxing, for he had slowly started to nod off. It wasn't until he could hear voices in his adjoint room that he realised he had fallen asleep and that the water had long since turned cold. So he quickly got out and dried and dressed himself - he was glad that he had put another set of clothing in the bathroom, otherwise he would have been in for some embarrassment.

When he was all freshened up and dressed, he was about to leave the bathroom when he saw Nagisa's crown still perched atop of a pillow on the marble counter. He picked it up, thinking it was about time it was returned to its rightful owner.

Outside of the room Haruka, Nagisa, and Rei were already waiting for him.

"I think this belongs to you," Makoto commented as he walked over to the bed and held out the crown to Nagisa, who accepted it with a smile. But instead of putting it on his head like Makoto expected him to, Nagisa got up on his toes and reached up to put it on his head instead. To make it easier for him, Makoto bent through his knees while he chuckled.

"I think it suits you more, Prince Makoto," Nagisa said, making Makoto laugh even harder because they both knew that wasn't true.

"Does it?" he asked sceptically, realising that Nagisa had never seen him wearing his crown before.

"It does," Haruka concurred, smiling softly at him.

"It feels a little odd," Makoto giggled, reasoning that it wasn't weird that Haruka thought that, "It's far from my usual attire though, but you've never seen me in that before." Although the rest of his sentence died out on his tongue, his unvoiced words resonated through the room like he had actually spoken them aloud.
"I have," Nagisa chimed in, "You look just as good in those as you do in these."

A soft, appreciative smile graced Makoto's face and Nagisa's attempt at reassuring him. He had probably caught onto his fear of disappointing Haruka. And he seemingly wasn't the only one.

"I'm guessing the only difference is that your garments actually fit you?" Haruka jokingly questioned, and Makoto was reminded of what Kisumi had told him about Haruka not caring about the garbs of others - especially not when the person inside the garb was as handsome as Makoto.

"Most of them," Makoto awkwardly chuckled, for he knew he definitely had a some trousers and shirts of which the sleeves and pant legs were a tiny bit too short or too long. "They're not tight around my shoulders, that's for sure."

"Well, even if these ones don't really fit, they do look good on you, just like the crown does," Nagisa thought and Makoto could see that Haruka agreed with him on this too.

Makoto laughed again, "I can't say that I agree, but they do make me feel a little royal."

"You are a little royal, Prince Makoto," Haruka teasingly said, and although Makoto didn't completely catch what he implied with that, hearing him call him that made him feel strangely happy.

"I did come here as a prince, though it was not as Prince Makoto."

"Either way," Rei interrupted their nonsensical discussion as he was cleaning his spectacles with a handkerchief, "I think it's about time to start packing."

"You're right." Makoto removed the crown from his head and planted it on top of Nagisa's blond locks where it belonged.

"I'll help," Haruka offered as he pushed himself from the fauteuil that was in the corner of the room.

"Me too!" Nagisa exclaimed but Makoto and Rei both shook their heads.

"It's alright, we've got it," Makoto said with a smile, and he could immediately read all the protests that flashed across Haruka's face. They all came down to the fact that he didn't want Makoto to treat him differently from how he had before simply because their status differences and the social power imbalance between them were out now, because none of that had to mean anything if they didn't add value to it. "Really Haru, it's okay," he insisted, needing Haruka to know that he wasn't saying or doing this because of their different places in the societal hierarchy, but because this was just how he was; if Haruka had been a commoner like himself, he would have said this too.

"It is rather impractical to pack one suitcase with four people," Rei declared as he put his spectacles back on his nose, "So Makoto and I will manage by ourselves."

Realising that that made sense, Haruka complied and sat back down in the armchair. "Just tell me if you need me to do anything."

"I will," Makoto assured and he and Rei got to work.

While they were packing, Nagisa told them about his running away adventure a little more in depth. Although the choice of evading the future of the arranged marriage was still one that he supported, he did admit that he could have chosen another way to do it. After just a few hours he had already begun to worry, because it was not exactly something that he had thought through, but
he was too stubborn to go back, deciding that he would figure things out along the way.

Even if it was a little amusing to hear about Nagisa's antics, Makoto did feel sorry for him since it wasn't exactly his fault that he hadn't known what to do for he had never been taught how to survive outside of the palace walls. But the knowledge that he made it back to familiar people and would ultimately find his way back home without any serious problems was comforting, and it was safe to conclude that Nagisa had learned his lesson.

This conversation sparked more questions from Haruka about their meetings, wanting them to go further into detail especially since he had been a popular topic of discussion himself. They shared a good laugh in reminiscence of the times when they had both been so worried, and even if they still were right now, the reason for their worry had been changed entirely in a mere fortnight.

The afternoon continued with pleasant conversation filling up the air, ranging from serious and important to trivial and amusing.

Just before dinner Haruka left to make sure that the maids had packed everything that was essential; even if it wasn't an officially organised trip, he would still go to meet the king and queen of Sano and he wouldn't be able to negotiate if he couldn't prove himself to be Haruka Nanase and would look improper or ignorant. After all, he did want to do his very best to make Nagisa and Rei's dream come true and good preparations were vital in that.

After they had dinner they went to make their leave.

Outside at the carriage stood a tall and seemingly bored man who introduced himself to them as Sousuke Yamazaki. Although he looked like a good man in general, Makoto could understand from his general aura that his and Haruka's personalities were not the most compatible. But perhaps that spending this time outside of the formal settings would be enough for them to see that the other wasn't as bad as they always assumed. At least, Makoto hoped so; even if they didn't need to become best friends, he hoped that they would stop disliking each other for even if they weren't vocal about their displeasure at the other's presence, he was afraid that their silent clash would unintentionally destroy the friendly atmosphere that he wanted to maintain. It was a selfish thought once again, for besides the visit to the royal family, he truly wanted to use this trip to prove himself to Haruka without him getting distracted by unnecessary tension created by irritation because of his guard. But since Haruka assured that that wouldn't be the case either way, he wanted to believe that.

Nagisa, Rei, and Kisumi bid them their goodbyes for now, for even if they would be travelling at the same time, they didn't plan to make frequent stops so they would get to Sano sooner, so quite some hours would pass before they got to speak to each other again. Since Kisumi was more familiar with the road to Sano than Sousuke was, they decided that he would lead the way.

All-packed up and ready to go, they left the palace of Iwatobi behind to begin their hours-long journey to Sano. And although the way here definitely hadn't been unpleasant, Makoto knew that this trip would be even better because not only was the company even greater than it had been before, he was finally going back home; back to his family with Haruka beside him.
Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed it!

So, I know that this chapter may have been a little disappointing to some people. I know that a lot of people would have liked to actually see the antics of Nagisa and Rei, but that was never a part of the way I envisioned this story. Regardless of what I'm writing, the focus always seems to shift to MakoHaru without my awareness so sorry to those who were hoping to see more of Rei and Nagisa in general (not that they don't make an appearance anymore, but you know what I mean). I could have written it just because people want to read it, but then I would not only ruin my planning and the cohesiveness of my plot, but I would also feel like I'm not staying true to myself because I would be writing something just because people want to read it and not because I want to write it. And I don't think it would have been a satisfying thing to read if I had to shoehorn it in or if I had to force myself. I hope that you understand and therefore I would like to kindly ask you that if you have any negative feedback about this, then please keep it to yourself. I was already arguing whether or not I should even mention something about it here because I don't want to seem super defensive about it either, but I'm really not waiting for comments filled with negativity. I'm sorry if this seems weird, but this was really making me anxious and even hesitant to post this chapter, and I really don't want to feel that way when I post my writing. After all, writing is supposed to be fun and I'm kind of ruining it for myself already, so I hope you understand. I'm sorry again.

I hope that despite the possible disappointment, you still enjoyed this chapter and that you'll stick around for the rest of this story.

You can find me on Tumblr and Twitter @DatHeetJoella if you want to talk about MakoHaru or if you want to say something to me regarding my fics over there.

Once again, thank you for reading and I hope you'll have a wonderful day!
Reunions, Reunions

Chapter Summary

Back in Sano, Makoto finally saw his family again, and he had a lot of explaining to do.

Chapter Notes

I wanted to post this chapter on Makoto's birthday (November 17th) but unfortunately I was not able to get the proofreading done before then because again, this chapter is massive. So I'm a couple of days late, but let's all just pretend that I did make it on time; Happy (belated) birthday, Makoto!

Another thing that I'm really excited about is that my amazing and talented friend anunyun on tumblr made a beautiful piece of art inspired by this fic, it's absolutely wonderful and you can check it out [here](http://example.com).

Next to that, I must say that I'm not completely satisfied with certain scenes in this chapter, but unfortunately I didn't know how to alter them in a way that did make me satisfied and the scenes are vital in the flow of the story so I can't just cut them either. Despite me saying this, I hope you won't notice which scenes I'm talking about so that it's just something that I as the author worry about and not something that's glaringly obvious in the chapter itself. Although the best course of action would be that I didn't mention it at all, but I can't help but be a little defensive about it beforehand because I do notice it myself, I just don't necessarily know how to improve it.

Anyway, I don't think I have much else to say unless I'm forgetting something again (which ultimately always happens) but I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was well into the afternoon by the time they were riding over the cobblestone path that led to the town Makoto lived in. The way here had felt much shorter than the journey to Iwatobi had felt, even though he had spent the majority of both trips asleep. He concluded that that was most likely because of Haruka's presence; time just seemed to pass without his awareness when he was talking with Haruka and even when Haruka was just by his side.

He had intended to speak some more with Haruka during the evening and that sentiment was shared, because Haruka asked him more about himself and his family as soon as they had left. So Makoto had eagerly started to talk about his parents and Ran and Ren, for even if the simple lives they all led were probably nothing impressive to Haruka, he was still proud of his family and their accomplishments.

Haruka had meant to listen attentively; he had asked about them with genuine interest rather than out of politeness, but he started to nod off pretty quickly, unable to fight against sleep. It didn't take long until Makoto could feel his head against his shoulder, his heavy eyelids having fluttered shut.
as his breathing found a slow, soft rhythm. It wasn't odd that he was tired since he hadn't slept much since last night, but Makoto still found it incredibly cute. He had brushed his hair out of his face before he covered them both with the quilt that Haruka had brought in order to keep them warm. Then he had allowed himself to be lulled to sleep by the lumps of the road as well, a content smile on his face as he leaned his head against Haruka's.

It wasn't until after the short stop they had to make to eat the breakfast that they had brought and were back onto the carriage that their conversation from the evening before continued. They had all agreed that they would go back to Makoto's family today and would go to Nagisa's parents at the palace the next day, so they were well-rested and presentable again. And although Makoto was really glad that he finally got to see his family again, there was a tiny part of him that was hesitant; he knew he had hurt them a lot by leaving abruptly and seeing them would be a real affirmation of the pain he had inflicted. But most of all, he was excited to wrap them in his arms again, to hold them close and tell them that everything was alright and that he was so sorry for what he had done.

He seemingly wasn't the only one who was a bit nervous; the closer they came to the town, the more jittery Haruka became, twiddling with his thumbs and smoothing over his clothing. It was weird to think about: a crown prince was nervous to meet a couple of low commoners. But they weren't just any commoners, they were Makoto's family, the people he loved and cherished.

Makoto completely understood why he was nervous, because he would have been nervous too if he were in his shoes - even though he had already met Haruka's parents, he was pretty sure he would still be nervous if he met them again right now even despite their differences in status - but he found it so adorable and endearing that it made his heart melt with fondness. But he knew that there was no need for him to be nervous at all, because once the initial shock was over after they told his family about everything, he was sure that they would love Haruka. So he put a reassuring hand on Haruka's fumbling ones and when he looked up at him, he smiled tenderly which made Haruka smile appreciatively in return.

They came to a halt at the stables right outside the town. Because of the market there were a lot of people passing through the large main street, so it wouldn't be very smart to try to drive their two carriages through the dense crowd. The distance to Makoto's house wasn't very far so having to walk wouldn't be too much of a problem, or so he thought; after all, he wasn't sure what the others considered to be far and only Rei had ever been to his house before, but since he also ran errands his idea of 'far' may be off as well. But the others didn't find it to be troublesome so with Kisumi, Rei and Sousuke carrying their luggage, they began their walk towards Makoto's home.

Makoto led the way with Haruka beside him, trailing behind them were Nagisa and Sousuke, the former bombarding the latter with questions - enthusiastically asked, reluctantly answered - about his career as a guard and aspiration to become a knight, followed by Kisumi and Rei who were catching up about each other's personal experiences these past few days.

As they strolled around, Makoto was greeted by some merchants and random bypassers and he naturally returned their greeting with a smile or a wave of his hand. Since he didn't want Haruka to feel weird about it, whenever someone called out to him he would explain to him who they were and how he knew them: from one of the many errands he ran, or because he would occasionally make small-talk with them at their stall, or even because they recognised him as the friendly musician who was often playing at the town square.

Hearing about all of this was strange to Haruka, for even if he knew that Makoto was a commoner and therefore part of a vast community and it was reasonable for him to know many folk, it was something he had never really thought about before. It was then that he realised that despite feeling so close to Makoto, he knew next to nothing about him aside from the things that he had told him.
Despite knowing what commoners generally were, he didn't really know anything about them; about their lives, their experiences, the things that brought them joy and grief on a day to day basis. It was a world that he had never really ventured in before even though he had visited towns and villages throughout Iwatobi in the past, because he had always seen them through a prince's eye. Even though he knew that there was poverty and famine among many people all over the world, he didn't understand what that was like because he had never and would never experience it himself - although he could imagine how much pain and worry there was, he could never truly understand it without having gone through it himself.

In an extremely odd way, that made him jealous. Jealous because there would always be parts of Makoto that he didn't understand, while there were so many others who did share the same experiences and could therefore relate to Makoto's past and feelings - of course, he was very grateful that he never had to go through the hardships that Makoto had to face, but it saddened him to know that no matter how hard he tried, he could never fully comprehend these things that were so impactful in his life.

He was jealous not only because these folk understood those parts of Makoto better than he ever would, but also because some got to see him grow up, were with him since he was a child as he fought his way through life yet despite it all always wore a smile on his face and was filled with gratitude for the things he did have. It made him even more aware of the privileges he had; while Makoto had done everything he could to make things better for himself and his family during the most dire of times, he had been at the palace moping about his duties and never realising how lucky he was to never have had to endure the things that were the reality of so many others. Rather than stating that he was jealous of their experiences, Haruka supposed it was more truthful to say that he was upset that Makoto and so many others had gone through these things.

The bitter and sorrowful thoughts that were coursing through Haruka's head didn't go unnoticed by Makoto and he grabbed Haruka's hand, squeezing it softly to make Haruka look up at him. When he did he smiled gently, trying to wordlessly tell him that whatever it was he was worrying about, it wasn't necessary. Even if their pasts had been spent with such distance between them, both literally and figuratively, that didn't have to mean anything for the future as long as they wouldn't let it. That conveyed sentiment made Haruka smile softly as well, knowing that he was right. It was useless to dwell on the past since they couldn't change it anyway. Those efforts were more wisely spent on the future.

Besides the few exchanged greetings and explanations, the way up to Makoto's house was spent in relative silence since their minds were both preoccupied with their own worries and nerves; Makoto was afraid of the confrontation with his family's pain, while Haruka was incredibly anxious to meet the people who were so important to Makoto, the people who shaped him to be the wonderful individual he was today. But despite their nerves, they were mostly glad and relieved that Makoto got to be reunited with his family after spending more time apart from them than he ever had before.

At last they were standing in front of a small house right next to a shop with a sign that read 'Blacksmith Tachibana' hanging from the stones. It was a generic name for a shop, but it told exactly what one needed to know. Seeing the sign was a relief to Haruka, because it confirmed that up until this point, Makoto had not lied to him yet - not that he had expected otherwise.

"Do you want us to stay here?" Haruka inquired, understanding if Makoto wanted to have his privacy when reuniting with his family.

"No, it's alright," Makoto said with a smile, knowing that even if his family would be overwhelmed by his return and didn't know that he brought along some people, they wouldn't want anyone to
feel unwelcome in their home since they most certainly were not.

"I'll wait outside," Sousuke mumbled as he leaned against the frontage of the house. Besides his introduction, this was the first thing he had said to Makoto since meeting last night.

"Are you sure?" Makoto questioned in bewilderment, furrowing his eyebrows, "You can come in too."

"Yeah."

"Alright," he muttered, not wanting to force him to come inside either, "If you change your mind then you're always welcome."

Sousuke responded with nothing more than a slight nod of his head and a small grunt, so Makoto got the message that he didn't want to discuss it any further. Since he didn't want to prolong this awkward interaction, he told himself to focus on the situation at hand. Finally, after five long days, he would see his parents and siblings again.

With a deep breath, he opened the door to their small but cosy house and called out, "Mom?"

At the counter of the small kitchenette stood his mother, who had looked up at the sound of the door creaking open and her eyes widened in surprise when she saw her oldest son walking through the threshold.

"Makoto!"

Within a split second her arms were around his neck as she began to cry tears of relief, burying her head in Makoto's shoulder and she leaned heavily onto him. He could easily support her weight without them both toppling over and he naturally hugged her back. He hadn't been this glad to hold his mother since he was a child and he tightened his arms around her, sighing deeply because he was finally with her again for the first time in forever. Unconsciously he lifted her small form off the floor as he held her against himself, feeling so good and so bad at the same time. The last thing a child ever wanted was to see their mother cry, let alone be the reason of her tears and the knowledge that this was most likely not the first time she had cried since he left so abruptly made him feel even worse. But he was so glad that she didn't have to worry anymore.

"I'm so glad you're alright," she sobbed, pulling back to cup his face in her hands as tears ran down her cheeks, "We were so worried! You were suddenly gone and there was nothing but this note and this man came and-"

Makoto cut off her rambling by pressing her against himself again, cradling the back of her head as he spoke, "I'm so, so sorry." It wasn't that he had wanted to interrupt her, but he couldn't bear to see and hear her cry any longer. Even if he didn't regret agreeing to this plan because he never would have met Haruka otherwise, he did regret that he left without telling his family. He had already been so worried about them and he knew what was going on, so the fact that they didn't even know why he had left and could have been expecting the worst was like a dagger right between his ribs. But he was the one who planted it there himself. "I'm so sorry, I promise I'll explain everything."

It was then that Makoto's father entered the room through the door that connected their house to the shop. He had probably been startled by hearing his wife's sudden yell, and when his eyes fell on her small figure wrapped up in the arms of their son, he gasped. "Makoto!"

Immediately he went over to them and joined their embrace, tightening his arms around them as stray tears began to leak out of his eyes as well. In response Makoto removed his hand from his
mother's head to hug his father back.

"Dad," he sighed as he tried to hold back his own tears, not minding the scent of soot and sweat that came from his father - and that were probably staining his borrowed clothing in the process, but that was about the last thing that was on his mind right then.

"I'm so glad you're home, son," his father confessed, his voice clearing conveying that a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders, "We were so worried!"

"I know, and I'm so incredibly sorry," Makoto apologised, feeling his heart bleed with immense guilt because of how upset he had made his parents, "But I promise I'll explain everything."

His mother sniffed deeply as she attempted to regain her composure, pulling back slightly so she could look at her son's handsome face once more, naturally making her husband loosen his embrace too. Makoto offered her a small smile as he raised his hands to her face to wipe her tears away. It was then that she saw something and immediately her relief turned back into motherly worry as she gently yet swiftly grabbed his left wrist and held his hand in front of her eyes.

"What happened?" she asked with concern lacing her voice.

For a moment his eyebrows furrowed in confusion as Makoto failed to understand what she was talking about, but when he looked down and saw the wound that lingered on his forefinger, everything made sense.

"Oh, it's just a cut," he brushed off with a shrug because it honestly wasn't that big of a deal, but his mother had a different opinion.

"Just a cut? From what?"

"From a knife?" he said dumbly, but then he elaborated, knowing that was not the answer she wanted to hear, "I accidentally cut myself when we were cooking."

"Cooking?" she questioned in disbelief, not even regarding that he had spoken in plural.

At that Makoto chuckled sheepishly. "It's a long story," he replied, smiling awkwardly at her.

"Speaking of which," his mother continued as if he hadn't said anything, studying his body, "Have you gained weight?"

That made Makoto chuckle once more, but this time it was out of joy. "I think I've gained about three kilos these past few days," he joked, not knowing if it was true or not but hoping that it was.

"And what are these clothes?" she wondered, grasping at the fabric with her hands.

"They're borrowed."

"Borrowed? From who?"

"Um, Dear?"

Before Makoto had the chance to answer, his father spoke up, wanting to gather his wife's attention. At the sound of his voice she looked up at him and followed his line of vision to the door, or rather, the four boys who were standing somewhat uncomfortably at the doorstep.

"Who are all these boys?" she asked, it being the umpteenth question that had left her lips in the four minutes that Makoto had been inside. And with every question, it seemed like she was even
more lost on what was going on, the bits of information that she had slipping through her fingers like water. Then, she saw a familiar face among the strangers. "You!"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Tachibana," Rei greeted awkwardly, stiffly nodding his head at her.

"You-" Makoto's mother stumbled, turning back to her son before she continued, "He came the morning you were gone and we asked him about you but he wouldn't tell us anything! He just gave us a large sum of money, said you were alright and then he left."

"I know. He promised me he would."

"You do know him," she concluded, suggesting that she'd had doubts about Rei's claims before, "so why didn't he tell us anything?"

"He couldn't. Look, I'm really sorry but it's a long story and before I can tell you, I need to introduce you to everyone," Makoto explained in what he hoped to be a reassuring manner, "Are Ran and Ren here?"

"No, they're still at school," his father informed him and Makoto nodded in understanding, not knowing exactly what time it was nor what time they usually returned because they were always here by the time he came home for dinner.

"Then I'll tell them when they're home," Makoto said, deciding that he didn't want to keep his parents in the dark any longer and he turned back to the door opening where the others were waiting. He beckoned them all inside and he took a step back so he was standing next to Haruka. "Mom, Dad, this is Haru," he introduced as he gestured to Haruka. Realising that wasn't an adequate introduction since it wasn't all that they needed to know, he elaborated, "He is the crown prince of Iwatobi."

Frowns immediately formed on their faces and they looked from Makoto to Haruka, like they simply weren't believing their ears and were waiting for Makoto to laugh and say that he was just joking. But Makoto didn't, because he had stated the truth.

"My name is Haruka Nanase," Haruka confirmed, his nerves clearly shining through in his trembling voice, and he bowed at them. "It is an honour to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Tachibana."

The jaws of both parents dropped simultaneously at this declaration, like Haruka was about the last person they had ever expected Makoto to bring back home - which, honestly, wasn't far from the truth. They gasped as they were completely at loss for words, because they didn't know the proper etiquette to greet members of a royal family, let alone how to be a host to them and this whole situation had rendered them completely speechless.

"N-No, it's an honour to meet you, Your Highness," Mr. Tachibana awkwardly stuttered, bowing deeply at Haruka and not coming back up because he didn't know what else he was supposed to do. His wife was still too baffled to give a coherent response of some sort.

"Oh no, please raise your head, Sir," Haruka blurted as he held up his palms, not knowing what else to do either.

"It's an honour to welcome you into our home, Your Highness," Mr. Tachibana continued when he straightened his back, "We don't have much to offer you, but-"

"Oh no," Haruka repeated as he dismissively waved his hands. It was most likely not the first time he had been treated like this, but the response of Makoto's father was just a little overwhelming to him especially since the nerves of their meeting were entirely mutual. "Please, don't treat me any
differently than you would treat any other guest," he requested as he bowed to them again.

His parents still looked hesitant, so Makoto cut in, "Really, it's fine," he assured them and he put his hand on Haruka's shoulder to silently ease him too, "Haru is just a normal boy." When Haruka eyed him sceptically, he said, "Well, not normal, but-

"But what?" Haruka interrupted as he bit his lip to repress a smile.

Makoto looked like he was torn between what he should say, because how did you tell your parents that the crown prince of a neighbouring kingdom was the most amazing and wonderful person you had ever met and that being around him was the easiest and most comfortable thing in the world? When Haruka snorted at his inner turmoil, he realised that he didn't actually want an answer and was just teasing him. "Haru! You know what I mean!"

Haruka chuckled softly at Makoto's exclamation, and only when Mrs. Tachibana spoke did they both realise that they weren't alone.

"It is very nice to meet you, Your Highness," she greeted as she bowed at him as well.

"You don't have to call me that," Haruka stressed, not wanting there to be a formal distance between him and Makoto's parents, "It's very nice to meet you too."

"Then, 'Haruka'?" she asked and Haruka nodded in acceptance.

Remembering that there were still others who needed an introduction, Makoto nodded to Nagisa who then took a step forward as well. "This is Nagisa," Makoto said as he motioned to the boy in question, "He's the prince of… well, of Sano."

The initial shock that had dwindled after meeting Haruka was back with even more intensity at the notion that there were not only one, but two princes standing in their modest house, and this surprised Mr. and Mrs. Tachibana even more. But before the same uncomfortable interaction could repeat itself, Nagisa spoke up.

"It's nice to meet you, Makoto's parents," he grinned as he bowed, "Just 'Nagisa' is fine too."

"It's very nice to meet you too, Nagisa," Mrs. Tachibana chuckled at his bubbly demeanour and strange yet accurate way of addressing her and her husband.

"Then, um," Makoto muttered as he looked behind them, "You've met Rei."

Makoto stepped to the side to give Rei some space, who walked further into the room and deeply bowed to Makoto's parents as well. "I'm Rei Ryugazaki, Nagisa's tutor. I'm incredibly sorry about our first meeting, but I hope that we can start anew. It's pleasant to make you acquainted."

"Of course; the pleasure is ours," Mr. Tachibana replied on both of their behalf, knowing that his wife was still upset about the first time they met this man.

Feeling that it was his turn now, Kisumi walked forward and introduced himself before Makoto had the chance to. "It's very nice to meet you," he said with a charming smile, "I'm Kisumi Shigino, a servant of the royal family. Nagisa's family," he clarified when he realised that his words could hold a different meaning considering Haruka's presence.

"Mrs. Tachibana returned his greeting before she started, "Why don't you all take a seat while I make us all some tea. I believe you've still got a lot of explaining to do." Although she had said it in a mockingly serious manner, Makoto knew that she did want to hear the truth as soon as possible
because she had been sick with worry while he was gone. "Makoto, go get some more chairs, will you?"

But before Makoto had the chance to respond, his father spoke up, "Wait. Haruka, did you come here all by yourself?"

"No, I brought a guard," Haruka stated, pointing towards the open door, "He's outside."

"He can come inside too," Mrs. Tachibana muttered with a mild scowl, almost as if she thought it was scandalous that the guard had to wait outside in the summer's heat.

"I told him that, but he insisted on waiting outside," Makoto defended, not wanting his mother to think that Haruka was someone who treated his staff like that when Haruka was actually nothing but kind and compassionate towards his servants.

"But he can't stay outside all day, he'll get a sunstroke!"

She walked over to the door and looked outside, finding Sousuke's figure nonchalantly perched up against the wall.

"Are you Haruka's guard?"

Surprised by this sudden addressal in an unfamiliar voice, Sousuke looked down to where the sound had been coming from and was met with a small lady. "Yes?"

Mrs. Tachibana smiled up at him. "I'm Makoto's mother," she said to clarify her presence, "What's your name?"

"Sousuke Yamazaki."

"Sousuke, why don't you come inside too?"

"No, that's alright," Sousuke brushed off, but Mrs. Tachibana wasn't having any of it.

"You can't possibly stay out here in the heat all day, you'll get a sunstroke!" she exclaimed with genuine worry in her tone, "And besides that, you look exhausted. You don't want to get sick, do you?"

"No?" he questioned, not knowing why she was so concerned about him when she literally met him three seconds ago.

"So why don't you come inside and have some tea?"

Insistence was masked in her kind and light voice, telling him that there was no room for argument. Why he was intimidated by a lady half his size was a mystery, but it was most likely the motherly and authoritative way of speaking that made him unable to refuse her offer. So with a muttered "Yes ma'am," he entered the house, and Mrs. Tachibana closed the door behind him. She probably reminded him of his own mother, or so Makoto presumed.

After confirming that this was really everyone, Mrs. Tachibana went to make some tea while Makoto and his father fetched chairs from all around the house so everyone could sit down. At last, they were all seated with steaming cups of tea and Makoto began to tell the story to his parents - and Sousuke, who also had absolutely no clue what had happened nor what they were even doing here because he had been off duty yesterday, but feeling too exhausted to care about it either way.
He started at the catalyst: how he had been playing guitar at the town square on a day like any other about a week and a half ago - it did raise the question from his otherwise ever-patient mother as to what that had to do with his sudden disappearance in the middle of the night, and he assured her that he would get there, but that he needed to tell things from the beginning or it wouldn't make any sense in the long run. He described his first meeting with Nagisa and Rei, after which Nagisa chimed in with the reason why he was in town in the first place; the marriage that had been arranged between the two princes and that a couple of days later, Makoto had given him advice. Makoto's parents were incredibly relieved to find out that the money their son made that week was not earned by him dabbling in shady or unruly business but rather because of the generosity and sympathy of Prince Nagisa - so in actuality, it was just a return of the taxes they paid.

Then Nagisa said that he had run away the night before his departure and why he did what he had done, which brought Rei to explain that he searched all around and suspected him to find refuge at Makoto's house, but when that turned out not to be the case he proposed this plan to Makoto: to go to Iwatobi and pretend he was Prince Nagisa. His parents were quite mortified to hear that the reason Makoto agreed was the reward, feeling ashamed that their finances were discussed with five complete strangers but Rei assured them that they should see it as him accepting a job he was offered, regardless how strange of a job it may have been. Ultimately, they were grateful that their son was willing to do something so dangerous for the sake of their family, but they were still upset with parental concern - which made Makoto apologise once more, but he admitted to them that he had absolutely no regrets for agreeing to this before he cut himself off, not wanting to get ahead of the chronological order of events.

He told his parents how rushed the preparations had been with only a short period of time to spare before the carriage left. Although he had ventured in a completely different world, he had been so stressed about the whole ordeal that he barely registered anything while he bathed and got dressed in Kisumi's clothing, that were small enough on him to cause discomfort. The journey to Iwatobi had been a blur for the most part, and it wasn't until he arrived in Iwatobi that evening that he was truly baffled by the differences in the social hierarchy.

But he hadn't had much time to be astonished before he got to meet King and Queen Nanase and most importantly, Prince Haruka. He had been so unbelievably afraid to blow his cover immediately and the general response of the king and queen made him even more nervous - although it had almost made him nauseous at the time, he was able to see the humour in it now and he chuckled as he recalled it. Mr. and Mrs. Tachibana had laughed as well when Haruka explained that the reason his parents had acted so weird towards Makoto was not because they had suspicions that he was an imposter, but merely because they had all been expecting to meet a small and dainty princess, which was about the opposite of who Makoto actually turned out to be.

Then Makoto described the days he had spent with Haruka; how they had swum and cooked together, that Haruka had made a painting of him, how they had danced even though Makoto was clumsy and didn't know how to dance, the walks they had taken through the beautiful gardens. He did leave out some of the details - the longing gazes, the lingering touches, and oh, the kisses - because he felt that they were too intimate and personal to share with everyone here, and he could tell that Haruka appreciated that as well. Although he therefore had not verbally expressed the feelings for Haruka that gradually blossomed in his heart, he didn't have to say it for his parents to understand; the enamoured smile that stretched his lips as he remembered the wonderful time together with Haruka and the fond gaze that Haruka's eyes held when he looked at Makoto told them all they needed to know.

With a snort of amusement he told them about how much he had struggled trying not to expose himself, and that he had ultimately ruined it for himself by running away when Haruka called him by the wrong name - again, he hadn't told them what had happened before that, but it was pretty
easy to guess what that was. After that he gave a quick rundown of how the guards had escorted him to the dungeon and the night he spent there together with Kisumi, only to discover that the reason for that had not been because Haruka found out, but because Rei had arrived with Nagisa.

The details of the conversation he’d had with Haruka were left out once more because he considered it to be something private that should only stay between Haruka and him. So instead, he just gave a quick conclusion that once he had explained the situation to Haruka they had made up and that after listening to the adventures of Rei and Nagisa, they had decided to come here as swiftly as they could.

Upon request Nagisa and Rei told them what had happened while Nagisa had run away and what Rei had done to find him. The story was so anticlimactic that it made Makoto’s parents laugh and even Sousuke snorted; after all, one would think that the quest to find a runaway prince would be much more complicated than asking a few merchants if they had seen anyone who fit the description and following the directions they gave, like Nagisa left a trail of breadcrumbs behind him as he made his way through the towns. But that wasn’t so strange, considering Nagisa was definitely someone who stood out from the crowd, with his bright blond hair and his colourful and expensive-looking clothing, but mostly because of the general innocence and cluelessness he emitted, a little frightened yet excited to discover the world outside of the palace walls. It wasn’t odd that bystanders caught on to the fact that contrary to them, he had not been tainted by famine and poverty.

But even if it was amusing, Rei was so incredibly relieved that it had been as easy as it was, otherwise they wouldn’t be here right now and things could have taken a major turn for the worse.

"So," Mr. Tachibana started once everyone had finished speaking, "What are you going to do now?"

"Tomorrow Haru is going to talk with Nagisa's parents," Makoto said, "He's going to try to make them cancel the marriage and arrange for Nagisa to be allowed to be with Rei instead."

"And after that?" his father questioned and Makoto knew him well enough to know what he truly meant with that. What about you and Haruka?

At that Makoto couldn’t do anything but shrug. "We don't know. For now we can only see how things go and hope we'll figure something out," he muttered and he had never sounded so uncertain before.

"We will," Haruka cut in, his clear voice startling everyone, "We will figure something out."

"Haru..." Makoto sighed at the determination in Haruka's voice and he smiled softly, knowing that he was just as willing to do everything within his might to make things work as Haruka was.

Their moment was interrupted by loud, bellowing laughter. Makoto looked over to his father who was apparently having a grand time and although he had no idea what he had found so amusing, it was good to finally hear his hearty laughter again.

"All of this is really something that could only happen to you, Makoto," Mr. Tachibana explained as he giggled - it was obvious who Makoto inherited the giggles from, Haruka thought with a smile. "Even as a child you always found yourself in the strangest situations, so something like this happening to you really shouldn't have been a surprise to be honest."

"Well, I can't help it either," Makoto claimed in moderate defense, since it wasn't like he went out of his way to get caught up into things like this, but he supposed it was just part of being an errand
boy and street musician, wandering around town for a good portion of the day; you were bound to
run into some trouble at one point or another. But he was grateful for all of it, because every single
event had led up to this current situation, and he definitely wouldn't have wanted to miss out on it.

"Either way," Mrs. Tachibana brushed off, not wanting them to get lost in a trip down memory
lane while there were still matters that required addressing, "You're all going to need a place to stay
until tomorrow. You're all welcome to stay here but I'm not sure if we have enough room to-"

"No, it's alright, ma'am," Rei assured, "Thank you for the kind offer and your hospitality, but we
will stay at an inn until then."

"Alright," she replied, accepting only because she knew that they didn't have the space and
resources to accommodate five guests, "But you're all invited to stay for dinner."

"Oh, you don't have to-" Haruka started but was ultimately cut off by Mrs. Tachibana.

"I insist," she said in that way that couldn't be defied, "It's the least I can do to thank you for taking
care of Makoto these past few days."

"That's really not necessary, I don't want us to be a burden or-"

"Nonsense!" she sternly yet kindly interrupted him again, leaving no room for argument, "I know
I'm not a chef so the food will most likely not be as good as you're all used to, but it's a token of
gratitude and I won't take 'no' for an answer." The smirk that stretched her lips was an amused one
but showed that although she had said it in a joking manner, she did mean every word.

"Thank you for your generosity, Mrs. Tachibana," Kisumi grinned, "I gladly accept!"

Following Kisumi's example, the others muttered their expressions of gratitude as well. Mrs.
Tachibana only smiled and nodded in response before she hummed as she pondered. "Is there
anything that any of you can't eat?" Everyone shook their head in response, and her smile widened,
"Alright, that's easy then."

"What do you need for dinner?" Makoto asked, wanting to ease her burden of having to cook for so
many folk, "We'll go get it."

"Oh, that's alright, I can go get everything myself," Mrs. Tachibana objected, but Makoto pressed
on - if he had inherited his giggles from his father, then he had inherited that tone that just couldn't
be argued with from his mother.

"No really, we'll get it," he said, "We'll drop by the inn first so they can drop off their stuff and
make sure they actually have a place to stay for the evening before they run out of rooms. Besides,
that way I can show them around town too."

"Alright," she complied because her son's reasoning made sense, "But you better come back once
you get everything!" she added and even if she couldn't repress her chuckles, Makoto knew that she
was being serious and that made him feel a pang of guilt in his stomach again.

"I will, I promise," Makoto vowed, and his mother's smile softened with genuine appreciation.

"Do you want me to make a list?" Rei proposed and Makoto merely shook his head.

"I'll remember it."

Once Mrs. Tachibana had told them everything she needed for dinner, she got up to grab the
money for aforementioned things but Haruka and Nagisa had stopped her and offered to pay for the groceries instead. She and her husband had refused at first, too proud to accept their pity and help, but they were not the only ones who had mastered the art of insistence; Haruka had claimed it to be their token of gratitude towards the kindness and hospitality of their hosts, after which Nagisa had jokingly said that they shouldn't defy their princely authority. It took a lot of convincing, but when they just got up and Haruka grabbed ahold of Makoto's arm to drag him out with them, Mr. and Mrs. Tachibana finally complied - for then, at least. Makoto had purposely tried his best to stay out of any financial discussions and would probably continue to do so in the future.

At last they left the house with baskets to put the groceries in and began to make their way towards the inn.

"Are you really sure I shouldn't have made a list?" Rei questioned in oncoming concern, afraid that they might forget something vital.

Makoto hummed in assurance and confirmation. "There's no need for that, I've memorised everything."

"That's amazing, being able to remember so much stuff!" Nagisa thought and Makoto giggled in response.

"Well, it's not like I had any other choice in the past; my mother can't write so it wasn't like she would be able to make a list, and I wouldn't be able to read it anyway," Makoto explained with a shrug, "So what I used to do as a child and had to get some things was make up a song in my head to help me remember what I had to buy, where to get it and how much it approximately cost, so I wouldn't be swindled by merchants who thought they could earn some more by selling their wares to an ignorant kid - not that anyone here would do that since they all know my family and me, but you never know."

"That's really impressive!" Kisumi exclaimed in fascination and the others nodded in agreement.

"Thanks, but it's not like I was able to memorise this much when I was little; I only had to get a few things back then and it wasn't like I never forgot anything. But if I did then I would just go back to get it or my mother would go get it instead. As I got older I was able to remember more and more so that's why I can remember everything now - and rarely forget anything as well."

"That's really clever; music and melodies are a great stimulus to train the memory. I'm surprised a young child was able to come up with such an ingenious method," Rei uttered, the serious analysis making Makoto laugh.

"It's not like I actually thought about it that way, I just found it easier; I would sing the song I came up with over and over under my breath so I wouldn't forget and wouldn't get distracted on my way to the shops or stalls."

"It's still amazing," Haruka murmured with a small smile. And absolutely adorable.

Haruka's smile brought a rush of fondness surging through Makoto's heart, but he didn't have much time to enjoy the warmth that was always present when he looked at Haruka because Nagisa's voice pulled him out of the thoughts he got so easily lost in lately.

"Do you still sing songs to remember things?" he wondered in admiration.

"Sometimes," Makoto admitted sheepishly, "but now I know where everything is and how much things normally cost so I don't have to mumble that to remember. I don't usually need it, but
sometimes I just do it unconsciously; it's a habit I can't seem to shake."

"That's so cute!" Kisumi cooed, "Do you have a song in mind right now?"

At that question Makoto's cheeks flushed. "I… I don't."

"You do! Come on, sing it!"

While Kisumi and Nagisa began to chant "sing it", Makoto looked over at Haruka for help but instead of the support he was seeking, he saw a glimmer of excitement in Haruka's eyes that told him that he wanted to hear it too.

A sigh left his lips because he knew he wouldn't be getting Haruka's aid, and although he usually wanted to comply with Haruka's wishes, he was a little too ashamed to actually do this. "What? No! That's too embarras-"

"Makoto!"

That loud yell of his name in a familiar, enraged voice startled Makoto and he abruptly shut his mouth. When he turned around to see where it had come from, he felt the front of his borrowed garments being tightly grasped as he was tugged slightly forward. This action took him even more by surprise and his mouth fell open when he stared down into fierce red eyes that were widened in anger.

"Rin!"

"Where the hell have you been?" Rin barked as he held onto Makoto's clothing even tighter and Makoto could feel his breath fanning against his face because of his proximity, "Do you have any idea how worried your mother-

"Yamazaki," Haruka commanded loudly, and Sousuke did what Haruka told him to and grabbed onto Rin's shoulder with the intention of making him lose his grip on Makoto.

"Don't touch me!" Rin yelped as he leaned back to avoid Sousuke's hand but unfortunately for him, Sousuke was much faster and much stronger than him. Despite this, he still didn't let go of Makoto as his eyes drifted from Sousuke to Haruka and back to Sousuke. "Let go!"

Sousuke merely smirked at Rin's protest, clearly not impressed. "You've got quite the temper, don't you?" he taunted and his words made Rin blush profusely - whether it was out of embarrassment or because of the dark timbre of Sousuke's voice, Makoto honestly couldn't tell. "Why don't you let go of him first?"

"Stay out of it! This is none of your business!" Rin snarled in response to Sousuke's calm, almost mocking suggestion.

"Actually, it is," Haruka interrupted, his tone cold and full of venom.

Rin frowned before he sceptically raised his eyebrow. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Haruka Nanase," Haruka said as he crossed his arms, "Prince of Iwatobi." Although he usually wasn't one to flaunt his status or title, Makoto could tell he was doing it now with the sole purpose of making Rin feel inferior because he was annoyed by his cocky attitude. If Kisumi already irked Haruka, then Rin was really getting on his nerves.

"Pff, yeah right," Rin scoffed in disbelief, but then he took a proper look at Haruka and realised
what type of situation they were currently in, and when everyone stayed quiet and Makoto only gave him a sheepish grin, it dawned upon him that Haruka had told him the truth. "No way!"

"Haru, Sousuke, it's fine," Makoto assured in an attempt to make sure the situation didn't escalate any further, "I know him."

Haruka let out a little huff of frustration before he turned to Sousuke again and gestured with his head for him to let Rin go, so he did.

"Rin, could you please let go of me now?" Makoto requested and his words made Rin, who was still perplexed, snap out of it and he finally released the cloth he was holding. "Thanks."

"Damn, Makoto, what the hell happened?"

He chuckled awkwardly, "It's a long story. Let's just say that I got an impromptu offer for a job in Iwatobi."

Rin opened his mouth to respond, but was ultimately cut off before he could say anything.

"Rin!" a feminine voice yelled, and a short girl that shared similar features with Rin stalked up to them, "What are you doing, running out on patrons like that in the middle of a-" She abruptly stopped her sentence and her eyes widened when she saw him. "Makoto!" She pushed Rin aside and wrapped her arms around Makoto's neck to hug him tightly.

"Gou," Makoto greeted as he bent down to return her embrace. He definitely preferred Gou's reaction to seeing him again over Rin's and he lightly pat her back in a friendly manner.

When she pulled herself out of Makoto's arms again, she turned back to Rin who she had just roughly shoved aside. "Well, what are you standing there around for? Go back inside and continue helping the patrons!"

Rin clicked his tongue in annoyance, but since he knew he had no other choice, he did as Gou had demanded him to and began to walk away bitterly. "This isn't over!" he called over his shoulder as he pointed an accusing finger at Sousuke, Haruka, but mainly at Makoto.

Once Rin was gone, Gou peered up at Makoto again and the irritation melted off her face immediately. "Sorry about my brother, you know how explosive he can be."

"Yeah, we noticed," Sousuke snickered, his words full of amusement at the scene Rin had made. At the sound of his voice Gou's eyes met his figure and a spark of interest lit up in them as she ran her gaze over Sousuke's muscular frame, but then she realised what she was doing and shook her head to get herself to focus. She looked back at Makoto and beamed, "Makoto, you're back! We were all so worried, I'm really glad you're alright!"

"I'm sorry for worrying you," Makoto apologised sincerely, because he felt really bad for making her concerned about him when, to be quite honest, she and Rin had never even crossed his mind while he was gone. But that wasn't the most pressing thing that was on his mind right then. "Rin said something about my mother…?"

"Yeah," Gou affirmed, the smile that had been on her face turning into a slightly pained one, "She came to the shop the morning you were gone, all panicked and upset with that note you left. She asked us to read it because she just couldn't believe what Ran and Ren had told her, and then she asked us if we knew anything or if we were the ones who wrote the note. When we told her that we didn't know anything and hadn't spoken to you in a while, she just broke down crying."
“I see,” Makoto sighed and his stomach twisted with guilt at Gou’s words. Although this much was to be expected, hearing Gou confirm it aloud made it feel a million times worse because he now knew for sure that his mother had been completely distraught at his disappearance. He was going to have to give her another big hug when they came home, wanting to do everything in his might to comfort her and make it up to her even a little bit. “I'm really sorry, Gou.”

"It's fine, I'm just glad you're okay. Besides, I'm not the one you should be apologising to."

"I know, I already went home and explained everything to her and my dad," Makoto assured her and she smiled approvingly at him. For some reason, Gou had this authoritative air around her that made him feel guilty and bad if he defied her. She probably knew this, because she always seemed to be able to work it to her advantage.

"I'm glad. She was really worried about you, Makoto. We all were - even if Rin won't admit it. As soon as your mother said you were gone he went out and searched all around town for you."

"Really?" Makoto questioned in surprise, feeling both touched that Rin cared that much and bad for worrying him as well. He knew Rin was a lot more sensitive and emotional than liked to let on, but it still baffled him that he had been able to evoke such concern out of him. Though admittedly, he would have done the same if it was Rin who suddenly vanished in the middle of the night. "I suppose I should apologise to him too, then."

"Oh, he'll manage," Gou joked as she waved dismissively with her hand, and then she asked the question that had been playing through her mind since the moment she saw him, "Are these your friends? I've never seen them around here before."

"Yeah, they live outside of town," Makoto said to simplify his answer, not wanting to go into too much detail about everyone's places of residence because that would surely elicit more questions that he didn't exactly have the time nor liberty to answer right then and there.

"I see. It's nice to meet you all. I'm Gou, and that was my brother Rin," she introduced herself and Rin to the boys in front of her, smiling sweetly as she did.

Everyone returned her greeting and introduced themselves in response - Makoto was amused to hear that contrary to earlier with Rin, Haruka now solely introduced himself as 'Haru'.

"How did you all meet?" Gou asked out of curiosity because Makoto's vagueness from before didn't satisfy her completely, "Was it during your job out of town?"

"Sort of," Makoto sheepishly shrugged, "Look, it's kind of a long story…” It wasn't that he didn't want to tell Gou, but they were in the middle of the street and this was not exactly the ideal situation to relay the events of the past two weeks again. "We don't really have time right now to-"

"I get it," Gou said in understanding, holding up her hand to halt him and assure him that it was fine. "I should probably head back to the shop as well."

"I'll drop by soon to catch up on everything, alright?"

"Thanks, I'm sure Rin will appreciate that," she commented, but her tone indicated that she appreciated it as well. "Well then, see you, Makoto!"

"Bye, Gou!"

Gou turned around and made her leave, but not without looking back over her shoulder and waving at the group of boys before she disappeared into the crowd.
"Sorry about that, guys," Makoto apologised when they resumed their journey to the local inn. Although it had been an awkward encounter and he felt bad that the first time the others met Rin had to be when he was angry and mildly aggressive, he had to admit he was sort of glad for Rin's diversion from the topic they were discussing earlier.

"It's alright," Haruka muttered, but his voice betrayed that he was a little unsettled by what had happened - specifically, the hug that Gou had given Makoto, or so it seemed. But Makoto reasoned that that wasn't so weird, since Haruka was most likely not used to people greeting each other in such an informal way. He made a mental note to give Haruka a big hug later as well. "Where do you know them from?"

"My parents are friends with their mother," Makoto provided, but before he could continue, Nagisa cut in.

"Only with their mother?" he questioned with furrowed eyebrows.

Makoto nodded, smiling sadly at Nagisa's confusion. "Their father passed away when they were younger."

"Oh… sorry."

"It's alright, you couldn't know that."

"What happened to him?" Sousuke asked, and it honestly surprised Makoto since Sousuke hadn't shown any particular interest in their conversations before and had never actively participated either. It made Makoto wonder if the interest he had seen in Rin's eyes - although it had been unsuccessfully masked with fury - earlier was somewhat mutual, but he decided not to comment on it because it would be denied anyway.

"He was a fisherman, drowned during a storm; they used to live in a different kingdom and moved here after he passed away for a fresh start," Makoto said, "Their mother opened up a tailor's shop and Rin and Gou both work there as well."

"They're tailors? That's strange, I've never seen them before," Nagisa mentioned, thinking back at all the tailors his family had ever hired but Rin and Gou's faces were not among them and hadn't been familiar either.

"I think that's because your family probably hires different tailors; expensive tailors who work exclusively for the wealthy and noble. They mainly work for the common folk like me."

"Oh, I see," Nagisa nodded in understanding, "So they make your clothing too?"

"Actually, no," Makoto chuckled as he shook his head, noticing that his words were easy to interpret that way when that was not what he had actually meant, "My mom makes our clothing herself."

"Really, she can do that?" Nagisa wondered in genuine awe because it sounded like something very difficult and impressive.

"Hmm. In fact, she helps out at the tailor's shop every so often," Makoto revealed, a small sense of pride settling into his heart. His mother may be illiterate, but that didn't mean she wasn't smart or talented.

"Wow, that's amazing!"
"Are you close with them?" Haruka then inquired, his sincere interest tinged with a tiny dash of jealousy, "With Gou and Rin?"

"Not really," Makoto said honestly, "They're nice but we're all pretty busy with our own lives. They used to go to school during the day and now they're always occupied with their tailoring jobs. I do run into them every now and then and sometimes when I'm around and not running an errand or something, I'll stop by the shop to say 'hi', but that's mostly it. I suppose they're the closest things to friends I have besides you, but none of us are really in the position to actually spend much time together. But I think you can relate to that, right?"

Haruka nodded in confirmation, and despite all of the major differences in their lives, they still shared similar experiences in some aspects. Although it saddened him to know that Makoto barely had any free time and that he had been constantly working for pretty much all of his life, it also felt good that this was a part of him that he actually understood. Even if the circumstances were completely different, it was still something they had in common and could therefore understand in each other. That made him happy, for even if their lives had been so incredibly contrasting, there were more similarities than initially seemed.

"Are they twins?" Rei asked and Makoto shook his head in response.

"Rin is about a year and a half older than Gou."

"What about you?"

"Me?" Kisumi's question confused Makoto and he frowned, but when he pondered about it for a second what he had meant dawned upon him. "I'm a few months older than Rin."

Another round of questions was asked as they made their way towards the inn. It didn't take much longer until they arrived at their destination and Makoto came to a halt in front of the entrance, naturally making the rest of them stop as well.

"I'll go inside to book us some rooms," Kisumi offered as he got closer to the door, "I'll put them in my name to avoid raising suspicion."

"Maybe you could go take a nap." Makoto suggested good-naturedly, considering the fatigue that was clear in Kisumi's eyes despite him putting on a bubbly demeanour, "You must be exhausted after last night. You too, Sousuke."

Before Sousuke could respond, Kisumi said, "I am pretty tired, so maybe I should. Is that alright?"

"Of course! We'll manage by ourselves so don't worry about it. We'll come pick you up before dinner."

"That's alright, we can find the way back to your house ourselves," Kisumi claimed and he smirked, "My memory is also pretty good, especially when it comes to directions. So what time are we expected to be there?"

"Alright," Makoto easily agreed, not seeing why he shouldn't, "Around six, I think?"

"Alright," Kisumi echoed, finally giving Sousuke the opportunity to speak his mind too.

"I can't," he objected, nodding his head at Haruka, "I'm his guard. I can't do my job if I'm sleeping."

"Well, you can't do your job either if you pass out from exhaustion," Makoto argued, crossing his arms in stubbornness, "It's not good for your health, and it's not like you would even be able to do
your job properly when you're so tired."

"Still…"

"I'll protect him," Makoto vowed solemnly, meaning those words with all of his heart, "I won't let anything happen to him, I promise."

This was not something that he was promising Sousuke, but himself. Regardless of any guards, Makoto would do everything he could to protect Haruka from harm or hurt not because he was a prince, but because he was Haruka. Because he was his world. He'd rather die than let something happen to him, would keep him safe even if it would kill him. It was an oath that was impossible to break, for the moment those words left his lips, they scorched themselves onto his very soul.

"Makoto…" Haruka whispered, his voice trembling with emotion, like he could feel the flame of determination that ignited in Makoto scorching his own flesh, the fire behind words that were so simple yet held so much significance. There were many who had vowed to protect him, knights and guards alike, and yet those words had never meant as much as they did now. They caressed his skin and brought warmth to his chest only to nestle themselves in the walls of his heart, to be felt forevermore.

Although he had always been the one who was protected, he knew that he would do everything within his might to protect Makoto as well, using whatever means necessary to keep him out of harm's way.

Despite witnessing the exchanging of vows that were partially unspoken yet filled the bubble around Haruka and Makoto, Sousuke still didn't look very convinced. But when he saw the fierce dedication that was burning in Makoto's eyes, he sighed in defeat. "Fine," he gave in as he rolled his eyes at their sappiness, deciding that he cared more for sleep than arguing at that moment, "Just don't tell your parents," he told Haruka in his own defense.

"Of course not," Haruka stated, not needing Sousuke to tell him something that was so obvious.

"Well then," Kisumi said in conclusion with an amicable smile, "See you later!"

"Have a nice nap," Nagisa responded, and Makoto and Rei muttered similar wishes.

Once Kisumi and Sousuke had disappeared into the inn with all of their luggage, Makoto turned back to the others. "Shall we go?"

"Yes," Haruka agreed, seemingly cheered up now that they had parted ways with his two least favourite members of their party - for then, at least.

The four of them continued to walk through the bustling town. Fortunately they didn't have to walk much further for the inn was pretty close to the most lively part of the main street where the market was held every Wednesday and Saturday.

While they were browsing through the wares and Makoto stopped at a stall that sold fresh fruits and vegetables, Haruka marvelled at the prices of the wares.

"Everything is much cheaper than in Iwatobi," he uttered, his soft voice drowned out by the rumble of the crowd so only his companions could hear him. "Four silver coins for a bag of apples? In Iwatobi you pay at least twice as much."

"Really?" Makoto questioned in disbelief, to which Haruka nodded, "That's so expensive! I already find four silver coins expensive enough as it is."
"Things are more expensive in Iwatobi," Rei remarked, adjusting his spectacles in habit, "But that is because the wages are generally higher in Iwatobi and therefore the income per household is higher as well. So while the prices are higher in Iwatobi, the wares that are sold are still much more affordable than here in Sano because the value of money is different."

"Oh," Makoto mumbled, "I didn't know that, but I guess that makes sense."

"Me neither," Haruka said, "I mean, I knew that there was a difference in wealth between our kingdoms but I didn't know it was this significant."

Although he had never really given it a second thought before, it actually did make sense when he thought about it; Makoto had told him how poor his family was even though there were two - often three - working people in his family of five. He knew Makoto was a hard worker and surely that meant that his parents were no slackers either, and yet they still didn't make a proper living. That could either mean that everything was incredibly expensive, that the wages were low, or, as turned out to be the case, a combination of both.

Once Makoto had gotten all the vegetables and fruits his mother had requested, they continued to stroll through the town. Nagisa kept getting distracted by all the sights and scents that came from the goods that numerous merchants were selling and wandered off, so Rei had no choice but to trail after him to ensure that he wouldn't get lost. Makoto didn't really mind it, because that meant that he got to be alone with Haruka - although 'alone' was not exactly the correct word, considering the dozens upon dozens of townsfolk around them. One shared look of green and blue told Makoto that Haruka shared this sentiment entirely.

Another stop was made at the stall of a farmer who sold eggs and milk and the likes of that. Makoto selected the best eggs that he could find, mentally comparing them to the eggs they had at the palace of Iwatobi, when Haruka and he had cooked and baked together. It was odd to think that had only been three days since then when it felt like so long ago.

"This is part of the cooking-process that we missed out on last time," Haruka said, proving that their minds were on the same page.

"That's true, so now we're completing the experience," Makoto joked in return as he handed the man behind the stall the amount he owed him.

"We're doing things a little out of order, though."

"We are, but I suppose that kind of fits us, doesn't it?" After all, it wasn't the first thing they were doing out of order; declaring their affection for each other without Haruka even knowing his real name, for example. "I can't believe that was only three days ago."

"I know," Haruka sighed in reminiscence, "It feels like a lifetime has passed since then."

A warm smile stretched Makoto's lips at the knowledge that Haruka felt the same about it. "I suppose that's because a lifetime's worth of events have taken place in those three days."

"Yeah," Haruka murmured, a tiny smile blooming on his face as well and with his free hand he lightly grabbed ahold of Makoto's arm to prevent them from getting separated in the crowd - and because he simply wanted to hold on to him.

Now that his secret was out and all of his cards were lying on the table for Haruka to see, the memory of their little cooking adventure was tinged with awkwardness and humour when he looked back on it. It was pretty amusing how silly everything had been, the lengths he had gone
through to hide his real identity and how, even though it was so obvious, Haruka hadn't noticed a
thing.

"Haru," Makoto called to get his attention, "Do you remember before we started cooking, I told
you that I would gather the ingredients if you read the instructions?"

"Hm," Haruka hummed in confirmation, encouraging him to go on.

"I did that so you wouldn't notice that I couldn't read, because I thought that as long as you told me
what to do, I couldn't mess up," Makoto chuckled, "But then, when I had to get the flour, I had no
idea which bag was the right one and when I saw that all the bags had words on them, I panicked. I
thought that I had ruled out the possibility of you finding out that I'm illiterate by getting
ingredients, but that kind of backfired and I was so scared that I would get the wrong bag, because I
had no idea how you would respond if I came back with a bag that said something completely
different. Eventually I was left with two bags and I was so relieved when you said that we also
needed baking soda, because that ended my torment. It felt like I was in there for a solid ten
minutes."

"In actuality, it was more like ten seconds," Haruka snorted, amusement playing at his lips, "I don't
know how I would have responded either if you came back with something else, because I didn't
expect a thing at the time. I just thought you were taking a little while because you overlooked all
of the bags because you're tall."

"If only that had been the case, then everything would have been so much easier," Makoto giggled.
It felt like those ten seconds he spent in the pantry had taken ten years off his lifespan.

"But wait..." Haruka muttered because something suddenly hit him, "You did say something while
you were in there, right?"

"'You're a clever man, Makoto. Use your head,'" Makoto recited, laughing lightly, "That's what Rei
told me after he taught me some basic etiquette right before we left, and while I was struggling to
get the right bag, my mumbling-habit got the better of me."

"I knew it wasn't just my imagination, but I didn't want to press in case it actually was," Haruka
said, thinking back at the time he was certain he had heard him speak and he was glad that he had
been right after all. "Honestly, that was the only thing I found strange that evening, but it wasn't
nearly enough to make me suspicious or anything."

"Well, I couldn't just repeat what I had said or otherwise I would blow my cover immediately, so I
just said the first thing I could come up with," Makoto explained for he'd had to do everything he
could to prevent accidentally revealing his true identity back then while he now wanted to be
completely honest about himself and clear up every lie gradually, "Now that we're on the topic, I
also wanted to cut the vegetables because I had never touched a fish in my life and I had no clue
how to prepare them, and again, I couldn't read the instructions so vegetables were definitely a
safer bet for me."

"I see, so it wasn't because you don't like the smell of raw fish?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I really don't like the smell of raw fish," he added, remembering the scent
and he scrunched up his nose. He could almost smell it again just by recalling it. "But I don't like
the smell of onions either so scents were not the main reason for my decision, like I mentioned
before."

"Still not convinced, huh?" Haruka teased, bringing another smile to Makoto's face like his words
were always able to do. Makoto bit his lip and shook his head, to which Haruka replied, "You will be someday."

"Is that a challenge?"

"The duty of my life," he claimed, but then he couldn't hold back his laughter either, "In all seriousness, I didn't think twice about your motive behind wanting to cut the vegetables because like I said, I was just glad I didn't have to chop the onions."

"I guess me being illiterate worked out quite well for us both," Makoto commented, smiling softly and Haruka nodded in agreement and mirrored his expression. His own words made Makoto remember something else as well and he started, "Also, when you asked me what other hobbies I had, I panicked because I didn't really have anything else I could do that wouldn't blow my cover, so instead I said the first thing that came to mind since not having another hobby wouldn't have sounded very believable."

"So that's why you didn't want me to show you the library," Haruka sighed and although he was smiling, there was a bit of dejection in his tone. At first this puzzled Makoto, but then he recalled what he had said to Haruka back then.

"Still, I meant what I said," he swore, making sure his words were filled with sincerity because he was telling the truth, "Even if I would have been able to read, I still would have said that."

That made Haruka's smile soften and for a second he leaned his head against Makoto's arm in the illusion that someone had bumped into him, but Makoto knew it was a gesture of affection that told him that the feelings that had been verbally expressed at the time were entirely mutual.

"Even if I can't read, saying that I like to read wasn't entirely a lie, though," Makoto continued, and Haruka looked up at him in wonder, wanting him to explain what he meant, so he did, "You know I have two little siblings, right?"

Haruka nodded. "Ran and Ren," he provided, showing Makoto that he had cared enough to remember their names and that made Makoto feel oddly warm inside.

"Yes," he affirmed with a fond smile, "They're much younger than me, about eight years, and when we were little our parents would always tell us bedtime stories before we went to sleep. But because they both can't read, we didn't have any books so every night they would make up a story themselves. We would give our suggestions of what we wanted to happen or how we wanted it to end, and our parents would change the story accordingly. I always loved those stories and when I got to a certain age, I began to tell Ran and Ren stories myself as well. So the thought of hearing all the stories that other people, people I don't even know, came up with sounds really appealing and it's something I've always dreamed of. Having access to the imagination of others sounds amazing and there are countless of stories out there waiting to be explored yet they're still out of my reach. I think that the reason 'reading' was the first thing that came to mind when you asked me what other hobbies I have was that, while I was pretending to be a prince, I could pretend to be the person I always dreamed to be and that person would be able to read."

"Do you want me to teach you?" Haruka offered, a genuine desire to make Makoto's dreams come true lighting up in his endlessly blue eyes. "How to read and write?"

"Eh?" Makoto mumbled, startled by the question even if it was an obvious offer after what he had told him. He had been so lost in thought that he didn't even realise what his words could imply. "Oh, you don't have to do that! I've already tried to teach myself in the past with Ran and Ren's schoolbooks but it was too difficult, so I guess I'm too dumb to learn it."
"You're not dumb," Haruka stated clearly, not wanting Makoto to think so lowly of himself. "So don't say you are."

Makoto couldn't help but smile at Haruka's defensiveness, that he wouldn't allow anyone to insult him, not even he himself. To Makoto it didn't feel like he was insulting himself, but rather that he was pointing out the obvious truth, but because he knew that this would bring on a discussion that he could never win, he decided not to argue it. "Still, I wouldn't want to bother you with it. And you've already taught me so many things, like how to dance and swim, and you've already offered to teach me so much more. I really don't want to be a burden to you."

"You're not a burden; you could never be a burden." Haruka's beautiful eyes were shining with determination and adoration and his voice was so full of certainty that Makoto couldn't do anything but believe every word he spoke. Their eye-contact remained as if Haruka was trying to ensure that Makoto would brand those words into his mind so he would never doubt it again, and Makoto's smile softened in affection. "Besides, you've taught me a lot of things too..." Haruka trailed off as he averted his gaze, a cute blush dusting his cheeks. But before Makoto could ask what he meant, he quickly continued, "This is something you want, right?"

Because he had promised to never lie again, Makoto knew he should stop beating around the bush and therefore he told him the truth. "Yes."

"Then I'm going to teach you, whether you like it or not," Haruka declared decisively, and although his words had been somewhat teasing, Makoto knew that once Haruka had his mind set on something, he would do it.

Although his avoidance of the subject might have suggested otherwise, Makoto did really appreciate Haruka's care and heartfelt words, and he simply couldn't stop smiling as he looked at him. "Thank you, Haru."

In response Haruka smiled as well, lightly bumping into Makoto's arm again in a silent answer. "So, what's next?"

They continued to walk through the street, stopping at some stalls to buy things for dinner before moving on to the next item on Makoto's mental list. While they were talking about anything and everything, Makoto kept remembering more things that he had told Haruka back in Iwatobi that were false or not entirely true, so he told him the things he couldn't recall yesterday. He had felt so bad about lying to Haruka and it had been hard to keep track of his own words when he was with Haruka because it felt so natural, the conversations that were held otherwise would have had no place for lies at all, so it was incredibly relieving to finally come clean about many of them. Although he had been a little afraid that with every lie he admitted, Haruka's affection for him would shrink until there was ultimately nothing left, in reality the opposite happened; with every truthful detail he told about himself, Haruka's smile widened with fondness.

Their conversation was occasionally interrupted when an acquainted merchant called out to Makoto and asked him who the boy beside him was. For convenience and security's sake, he introduced Haruka to everyone as 'Haru', a friend of his who lived outside of town and was over to visit him. Fortunately Haruka played along without missing a beat, so there were no awkward moments of hesitation that could raise any questions or suspicion.

Eventually they saw the backs of Rei and Nagisa standing in front of a baker's stall. Thankfully their somewhat flamboyant appearances stood out from the crowd, otherwise finding them could have been a lot harder; Makoto could truly understand how easy it had been for Rei to track Nagisa
down because they contrasted clearly with the rest of the townsfolk. They walked up to them and
Makoto opened his mouth to call out to them, but before he could say anything, Nagisa spoke up
first.

"Which of these do you think would be best, Rei?" he wondered as he let his eyes roam over
dozens of pastries, "Which ones should we get?"

"You want to get some?" Rei asked in bewilderment, frowning down at his prince.

"For dessert! Since Makoto's mom is cooking for us, it's good if we get the dessert, right?"

"You should have asked her first! Perhaps Mrs. Tachibana has already planned something for
dessert or is there something else going on, so you cannot just bring it over without asking!
Perhaps she will take it as an insult, as if you find her to be too incompetent to provide for
dessert herself, or like you are expecting her cooking to be bad so you brought something yourself."

"You're overthinking it, Rei," Nagisa brushed off, "See it as our token of gratitude that she'll be
cooking for us, and an apology for kidnapping her son."

"You're just saying that because you want to eat it yourself, aren't you?" Rei questioned sceptically,
"Besides, I didn't kidnap Makoto, he came along out of his own free will."

"Um, guys…?" Makoto mumbled, the sound of his voice making Rei and Nagisa turn around
abruptly.

"Makoto, Prince Haruka, we hadn't noticed you were behind us," Rei stammered, feeling a little
embarrassed since he didn't know for how long they had been standing there and therefore how
much of their conversation they had heard.

"It's good that you're here, Makoto," Nagisa exclaimed, turning to him with excitement and a glint
of mischief twinkling in his magenta eyes, "Would your mom be offended if we brought dessert?"

"Not at all," Makoto said with a gentle smile, "If anything, I'm sure she would appreciate the
gesture and your thoughtfulness."

"See!" Nagisa retorted, glad that Rei had been wrong and he was right, "Now, which ones should
we get…"

"How many people will be at dinner?" Rei inquired, sighing in defeat.

After a split second of pondering, Makoto muttered, "Ten."

"Ten, huh?" Nagisa mumbled, "Perhaps it's better if we get a cake then. Two cakes. I want a
strawberry one, and the other…"

"Nagisa, you can't just decide that on your own! What if someone is allergic to strawberries, or
doesn't like-"

"I know!" Nagisa cut Rei off, not wanting to hear another one of his lectures when he had already
thought about that. "That's why we're getting two different cakes so everyone can choose which
one they want. Now, for the second cake…"

"Chocolate cake," Haruka disrupted Nagisa's contemplation, clearly making it sound like there was
no room for argument and Makoto's heart fluttered inside his chest. He had told him the reason
why he wanted them to make chocolate cake back in Iwatobi and that it had been just as good as
he'd always imagined, if not even better than that and although Haruka wasn't that fond of it himself, he wanted Makoto to experience that again. Even if his ways of expressing himself may have strayed from the norm, Haruka was so kind and sweet and with every little gesture of consideration Makoto grew to adore him more and more.

"Yes, chocolate cake!" Nagisa agreed enthusiastically, "Nice, Haru."

"Well then, hurry up and buy them so we can continue," Rei chided, pinching the bridge of his nose in slight annoyance at Nagisa always getting his way.

"Yes, yes," Nagisa muttered, having grown immune to Rei's attempts at hurrying him and therefore blatantly ignoring him, "Mr. baker, can I get…"

While Nagisa was ordering, Makoto turned back to Haruka and murmured, "Thank you, Haru."

Haruka didn't say anything in response, just smiled warmly while he softly rubbed his fingers over Makoto's arm.

Once Nagisa got the cakes he wanted, they turned around and made their way back to Makoto's house.

There were no more interruptions by strangers on the way back; the air was mostly filled with Nagisa's meaningless chattering and some short responses here and there. It wasn't until they were almost back at the blacksmith's that Makoto's name was yelled yet again. But this time it wasn't by an enraged Rin nor a friendly neighbour, but two children who called out simultaneously.

"Makoto!"

Immediately Makoto crouched and put the basket he was holding beside him on the ground as the smaller bodies of his siblings crashed into him.

"Ran, Ren!" he exclaimed as two sets of arms wrapped around his neck and he wound his own arms around them, holding them against himself. "I missed you so much!"

"We missed you too," Ran said as she buried her head in her brother's shoulder, "Where were you?"

Before Makoto had the chance to answer, Ren spoke as well. "Why did you leave?" he asked, his voice thick with tears that would soon be shed, "I thought you'd never come back home."

"Ren, Ran," Makoto sighed, "I'm so sorry. I'll tell you everything soon."

"Don't leave us," Ren pleaded as warm tears welled up in his large brown eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

Seeing his little brother so upset broke Makoto's heart and he pressed his head against his chest to soothe him. "I would never leave you," Makoto assured and although it was technically a lie since he knew what he was getting himself into when he agreed to go to Iwatobi, it wasn't a lie the moment he uttered those words. Because he couldn't imagine a life without his siblings, and he couldn't even begin to understand what he had been thinking at the time.

He knew it was desperation that dictated his actions, but witnessing the sheer pain he had put his family through made him question if it had been worth it in the first place if things would have developed differently than how they had now. So he was so immensely glad that things had turned out the way they did, that he was able to hold Ran and Ren and his parents again, and that he was able to introduce them to Haruka on top of that.
"I knew you wouldn't," Ran declared solemnly, clearly trying to hold back her own sobs by putting on a tough façade, "I knew you would come back to us. Because you love us."

"I do," Makoto giggled as he tried to repress his own tears as well, "I love you so much." To strengthen his words he pressed a kiss to both of their heads and tightened his arms around their bodies.

While Ren was still sobbing into Makoto's chest, Ran pulled back and her teal eyes found the three boys that were standing around them, watching the scene unfold. "Who are they?" she wondered as she gazed up at them and was met with some awkward smiles in return.

Having almost forgotten that his siblings hadn't been at the introduction, Makoto averted his eyes from Ren to look at Ran instead. "Let's go home first, alright? I'll tell you everything then."

"Okay," Ran easily agreed, and she removed herself from her brother's embrace entirely so they could go home.

Since Ren was still crying, Makoto lifted him with one arm as he stood back up. Immediately Ren wrapped his legs around his waist and in response Makoto raised his other hand to wipe the tears that had stained his cheeks away. When he remembered that he had been carrying a basket filled with groceries before, he looked back down in time to see Haruka grab it with his free hand and he offered Makoto an understanding smile, which made Makoto smile back at him in appreciation.

With Ren in his arms, Makoto continued to lead the way home - which wasn't far considering they had only been about twenty meters away from the front door when they saw each other again.

Ran opened the door and ran inside to greet her mother, after which the rest of them poured in as well, putting the baskets they were carrying down on the table.

"Welcome home," Mrs. Tachibana muttered as she hugged and kissed her daughter. When she let go she looked back up and said, "Welcome home to you too," in addressing to all of them, but then her smile turned into a somewhat concerned frown. "Where are the others? Kisumi and Sousuke?"

"They're taking a nap at the inn," Makoto informed, wanting to soothe her worries before they could develop, "They were up all night so they were exhausted, but they'll be back before dinner."

"I see," she mumbled as she nodded in understanding.

Ren, who had since stopped crying, gestured for Makoto to let him go so he could greet his mother as well.

"So, who are they?" Ran asked when she turned back to Makoto and company.

Makoto chuckled at her impatience; although it was very reasonable for her to be impatient since she had been left in the dark for days filled with worry and concern, but Makoto knew her well enough to know that she would have been just as impatient in any other situation. "This is Haru, this is Nagisa, and this is Rei," Makoto said as he gestured to each of them.

In response they all introduced themselves to Ran and Ren, who had since turned his attention back to the matter at hand. But since Haruka, Nagisa, and Rei had only given their first names, Makoto knew that that didn't tell his siblings very much, so he elaborated on their part.

"Haru is the prince of Iwatobi," he revealed like he was letting them in on a big secret, knowing just how excited this information would make his siblings, "And Nagisa is Prince Nagisa."
The twins gasped in unison. "Really?" When they all nodded in confirmation, Ran and Ren gasped again, "Wow!"

Another chuckle escaped Makoto's lips at how easily convinced his siblings were and how elated they seemed to be at the knowledge that there were two princes in their house. "Why don't you go say 'hi' to Dad and when you come back, I'll tell you everything. Alright?"

"Okay!" they answered simultaneously and they left the room and went to the workshop.

Now Ran and Ren were gone, Makoto turned to his mother to fulfill the mental promise he had made to himself. He hugged her again like he always did when he came home yet with a lot more emotion and intensity than usual and she laughed lightly as she returned his tight embrace.

"I'm so glad you're home," she whispered into his chest as the last remnants of concern seeped out of her in the form of a small sigh, feeling completely at ease now that she finally had her son back into her arms where he belonged.

"Me too," Makoto replied softly, "I'm glad to be home."

When she pulled back to look at her son, he leaned down and pressed a long kiss against her cheek, making her laugh again. In response she cupped his face and caressed his skin, and Makoto could read all the thoughts that were coursing through her head in her bright eyes. Although his actions had hurt her deeply, there was nothing left of the sliver of anger that had accompanied the worry because it had been cast aside to make place for absolute forgiveness and thankfulness. And Makoto vowed that he would do everything he could to make sure she never had to feel like that again, that there was only contentment and happiness filling his mother at the thought of him.

Silence was only present for a short while after they broke apart before Nagisa tactlessly interrupted it.

"We brought cake!"

Startled by this sudden outburst, Mrs. Tachibana's eyebrows were raised in surprise and Rei interpreted this reaction as offense. "We thought it would be our token of gratitude to you, Mrs. Tachibana," he quickly excused out of shame, "We hope that's alright; my deepest apologies if it is not."

At those hurried words Mrs. Tachibana chuckled again. "Of course that's alright. Thank you for your kindness; I'm sure Ran and Ren will be very happy with that. And so are we."

Nagisa whispered, "Told you so," to Rei, who sputtered in response.

Ignoring the interaction between them, Haruka spoke up. "Is there anything I can help you with, Mrs. Tachibana?"

Again she looked to be surprised, and soon an appreciative smile lit up her face. "Thank you, Haruka. If you don't mind, I could use some assistance with dinner. You have a lot to live up to after that story I heard," she joked, referring to the cooking anecdote she had been told earlier.

His mother's words left Makoto bewildered, because she wasn't one to accept the help of others so easily and it made him wonder if she had an ulterior motive. Completely unaware of this, Haruka simply nodded in response, not knowing what to say to that and again, Rei seemed to be incredibly embarrassed.

"Please forgive my manners, is there anything I can assist you with as well?"
"And I?" Nagisa chimed in.

"That's alright," Mrs. Tachibana kindly brushed off, "There is only so much room at the counter so we would just be getting in each other's way. Just Haruka's help will do." Then she looked at her oldest son. "I believe you still have to explain things to the twins, so if you all don't mind entertaining them for a while, then we'll be fine over here."

Although her words definitely made sense, Makoto could feel that something was still off. It wasn't something that he wanted to go into right now, so he simply seated himself at the table again and gestured for Rei and Nagisa to do the same.

"How much did everything cost?" Mrs. Tachibana wondered as she began to unload the baskets and put the wares onto the counter.

"Nothing."

Haruka's obvious lie made Mrs. Tachibana eye him sceptically. "So everything was free?"

In response Haruka nodded, keeping his face straight in a way that showed that he wasn't going to change his answer. If he didn't tell her how much everything cost, then she couldn't repay him either and she knew that that was the reason behind his lies. Her eyes kept staring into his, like she was waiting for him to back down but Haruka didn't waver and simply stared back.

Then a gentle smile broke through her serious expression. "I see. Well, thank you, Haruka."

Haruka only nodded again, though Makoto could see a tiny smile blossoming in his eyes that didn't quite make its way to his lips.

While the twins came back and sat down at the table as well, Haruka helped Mrs. Tachibana unload the baskets and waited for further instructions of what she wanted him to do.

The first question the twins had was if Rei was a prince too, and they were a little disappointed to find out that that was unfortunately not the case. Makoto informed them that instead of a prince, Rei was the man who had come to their house the morning after he left considering they were at school at the time and had therefore never seen or met him before.

"But he'll be a prince soon," Nagisa whispered to the twins and he winked at them, making them both burst out in giggles while Rei's face turned as red as the apples Mrs. Tachibana took out of one basket.

Soon enough the questions they had were all about Makoto's departure and the reason these strange men were in their house now, so Makoto knew it was better to tell them the story and answer any lingering questions afterwards - or, knowing the inquisitiveness of his siblings, in the middle of the story.

Makoto began to tell Ran and Ren a heavily diluted version of the events that had taken place during the past couple of weeks; excluding the dangers and risks, the thoughts of never returning, and the intimacy that grew between Haruka and him.

At first Haruka was listening along to the story he had heard multiple times already, the soft tone of Makoto's beautiful voice filling up the air and sounding like music to his ears. But soon his drifting mind was brought back to attention when Mrs. Tachibana called his name.

Upon hearing her voice, Haruka looked up to meet her eyes and he saw a gentle smile stretching her face in what appeared to be her default expression.
"You see, Haruka," she started, keeping her tone low so only he could hear what she was saying, "I actually wanted to talk with you alone for a little while."

Those words startled Haruka and he could feel nerves beginning to coil in his stomach again, not knowing what she wanted to discuss with him and what to expect. When Mrs. Tachibana noticed him stiffen up, her smile transformed into an understanding and reassuring one. For some odd reason, it did make him feel more at ease.

"All of this must have been a surprise for you too," she said softly, indicating that that was what she wanted to talk about. "To suddenly find out that the boy with whom you were supposed to get married was not actually who you thought he was."

It was obvious that she was saying this in order to open up the topic for discussion when it had only been skimmed over before, curious as to what exactly had been going on between him and her son and how he regarded him. Haruka didn't blame her; it was only natural that she was interested in her son and anything that concerned him, but unfortunately Haruka was not exactly skilled at verbally expressing the unfamiliar feelings that had been overtaking his mind and heart since a couple of days ago. And even if he were, it was still a little awkward to open up to a woman he had met just an hour or three ago, for he didn't even open up to people he had known his entire life.

But this wasn't just anyone; this was Makoto's mother and the last thing he wanted was for her to think badly of him.

After a short pause to ponder over his words and choose the right ones, he said, "It was a surprise. A big one."

"And yet you are still here now."

Her expression was kind, just like her tone was as she spoke. Rather than being accusing or interrogating, the atmosphere she was going for was more like she was subtly fishing for the things she wanted to hear and although he understood what she was doing, it made him a little uncomfortable and he averted his eyes to focus on what he was doing instead.

But he told himself to not run away from this confrontation because it was potentially one that decided his future relationship with Makoto and his family and therefore he had to give them a good impression of him.

When he looked back up at Mrs. Tachibana's friendly and patient face it was like he suddenly saw parts of Makoto in her; the droopy eyes, the upturned nose, the calm and gentle demeanour. It was obvious that mother and son would share some similar features, but it somehow made him feel some familiarity that made it easier to speak his mind as well.

"Because it didn't change anything," he murmured softly and his heart beat faster as he recalled the days spent back at home with Makoto by his side. Knowing that she would continue to pry until he had given her a satisfying answer, he decided to elaborate himself, "Of course, I was upset, really upset, but he apologised and explained the circumstances and I... I realised that nothing had changed. I mean, the situation and the future I envisioned changed, but it didn't change the way I feel about him."

"So you chose to forgive him for all of his lies?"

Haruka nodded. "He promised he would never lie to me again, so I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt."
"I see," she said, appearing to be pleased with his answer. Like she was glad that there was genuine devotion and forgiveness in whatever it was that was going on between him and her son. "I was surprised to hear that he was able to keep up his act for that long, although I would be lying if I said that he never lied to me before."

Haruka frowned as bits of dread and doubt began to fill him. Besides the whole façade he had put on before, Haruka had gotten the impression than Makoto was an otherwise honest man so the fact that his mother now claimed this to be false made him feel anxious. Afraid that the friendly and warm person who he had come to adore was nothing more than a skillful liar and he had still fallen for a delusion.

Those worries were gone as quickly as they had come when Mrs. Tachibana noticed his apprehensiveness and she explained what she meant with a sorrowful smile, "For instance… he would say that he wasn't hungry and give his food to Ran and Ren, but you could just hear his stomach rumbling. Or he would say that his shoes weren't too small and didn't hurt his feet, but his toes were practically ripping through the fabric. He lies about things like that."

The frown immediately fell from Haruka's face and made place for heartache. He felt so bad for even allowing the negative thoughts about Makoto to enter his mind in the first place. Although he sometimes lied to his family, it wasn't for himself but for them, because he didn't want to be a burden to them and prioritised their comfort over his own. Because he was kind and humble and selfless and he didn't deserve to suffer, didn't deserve all the hardships he had gone through while there were so many others who were ungrateful and selfish and yet got everything handed to them on a silver platter. People like him.

So Haruka made up his mind. He would make sure that Makoto would never have to go through anything like that again.

"I know Makoto promised he would never lie to you again," Mrs. Tachibana uttered, her serious tone pulling him from his thoughts, "But he might lie to you about something like that in the future. He just doesn't want anyone to worry about him and I think that brushing off concerns may have become a bit of a habit for him. So, please forgive him if he does or says something like that."

"Of course!" Haruka blurted, not wanting her to think he wouldn't understand if something like that happened.

Ideally, he wanted Makoto to be open and honest with him regarding everything but he understood that he was used to always keeping up his demeanour for the sake of his family and sometimes wouldn't admit to certain things that could cause for them to worry. He knew that opening up was a journey and he hoped to provide the comfort and safety Makoto needed to completely lay himself bare.

Although he wouldn't tolerate a meaningless lie coming from his lips again, he knew he wouldn't just cut ties with him because of this, because of his selflessness and the emotional scars that years of hunger and worry had embedded on his heart. He would support him like an unbreakable pillar, be the boulder he could lean on, the ever-present rock that would give him all the strength he needed to heal and so much more than that. That was what Haruka aspired to be for Makoto, until he was able to tear down the walls he built around himself to protect those he loved, and long after that as well.

Her smile widened in appreciation for even if his thoughts remained unvoiced, they were conveyed all the same. "Speaking of which," she continued in a significantly lighter tone, "It must have been strange and difficult to get used to the fact that his name is "Makoto" and not "Nagisa", right?"
"It was a little strange at first," Haruka confirmed, "But it wasn't as difficult as I expected."

Although Makoto had been "Nagisa" in his head at first, the moment Makoto told him his real name it was as if something clicked, like something was finally right in his mind even if it had never felt off before. But Haruka reasoned that was because "Makoto" fit him so much more than "Nagisa" did.

Before Mrs. Tachibana could ask him any more questions, Haruka decided to ask her something in return. "It must have been strange for you too," he said, and when Mrs. Tachibana looked at him with raised eyebrows, he clarified, "That Makoto was suddenly gone that morning."

"It sure was," Mrs. Tachibana sighed, shaking her head as she thought back to that dreadful day, "The only thing that we found to be a bit odd before that were the earnings he brought home last week, but that wasn't nearly enough to prepare us for him suddenly leaving like that. All we had that explained his disappearance was the note he left, telling us that he got an impromptu job offer for which he would be gone for an undetermined amount of time, that we shouldn't be worried about him and that a man would come soon to give us his payment. So we were obviously very concerned, because it's not like Makoto to leave without telling us and because we knew he couldn't have written the note himself, we thought something bad might have happened to him. That he might have gotten himself involved with some unruly, illegal business before and was paying the price for it now." She snorted as she recalled it. "Turns out he did actually get himself involved with some illegal business, but this was about the last thing I expected!"

"I can imagine," Haruka mumbled, feeling both bad that Makoto's family had to go through those days full of terror and anxiety while he was having fun with Makoto, and relieved to know that Makoto's family cared so much for him. While Makoto missed out on a lot of things during his childhood, love wasn't one of those things. "I'm sorry he made you worry, but he thought he was doing the right thing."

"I know he thought that and I really appreciate what he risked for us, but the least he could have done was told us before he left!"

"If he told you, would you have allowed him to go?"

"...No," she admitted sheepishly and Haruka couldn't stop himself from snorting as well. "But even if I was really concerned and upset and am still a little mad at him for leaving, I'm glad that he did it."

Haruka frowned in confusion at those words, because he couldn't imagine what her reasoning behind that was. The only benefit she had from all of this was the payment they had received for Makoto's actions, but was that really enough to take away days worth of worry and uncertainty?

As if she had read his mind, Mrs. Tachibana smiled at him again before she stated, "Otherwise he never would have met you, Haruka."

It felt like she was staring right through him when she had said that, for even if it was obvious that Makoto and he had feelings for each other that went beyond friendship, it was odd to hear her say something like that when he hadn't verbally specified what those feelings were, at least not to her. But that was not the only way her words hit her, because it implied that she was glad that the two of them had found each other, that she approved of whatever could happen after this. That made him happy and relieved, but he couldn't help the remnants of nerves and fear that lingered in his stomach.

"Are you okay with it?" he asked just to be sure, because it wasn't common for two people at
opposite ends of the social hierarchy to be together and Makoto and Haruka couldn't be further apart from each other in that sense. To him, the fact that they had even found each other, that they had crossed the distance between them against all odds meant that the bond they shared held a meaning deeper than any social construct and the prospect of that bond only growing stronger and deeper in the future made his heart ache in all the right ways. But just because he felt this way didn't mean that she necessarily felt like that as well and a part of him was desperate for her approval.

Fortunately, her smile only widened before she said, "Of course. It doesn't matter who you are, as long as you make him happy."

That reassurance made a soft smile of joy and gratitude bloom on Haruka's lips. He thought that all that mattered was that two people made each other happy, that they enjoyed spending time together and cared for one another wholeheartedly, and not what society defined them by. And he was so glad to hear that Makoto's mother agreed with that; surely that meant that the rest of Makoto's family shared similar views and wouldn't stand in the way of their happiness solely based on their identities - not that that was much of a surprise because Makoto's parents seemed like very down-to-earth people who hadn't cared about his status or title at all after the initial shock had dwindled and just saw him for the person he was, but the confirmation still brought him alleviation.

If only his own parents felt that way too.

They continued to make dinner while Makoto, Nagisa, and Rei humoured the twins by answering any questions that had lingered after they told them what had happened. Some of the more personal questions that were asked by either Ran or Ren brought them a scolding from their brother, mortification from Rei, and an excited answer from Nagisa. Going off the bits and pieces he could gather from their conversation, Haruka was glad that he wasn't a part of it.

Although he was used to being asked questions he didn't want to answer, they were never asked by two insistent and curious children and he wasn't sure how he would have survived that; even if Mrs. Tachibana asked him some personal things too, she asked them in a much more subtle and less pressing way, so it was much easier to answer them than a question from the twins would have been. They still asked Makoto questions about him, but he answered them in a way that was both satisfying but not too revealing and in-detail, so he was glad to have Makoto speaking on his behalf. After all, Makoto had known the twins since their birth and knew just how to handle them, while he didn't and the last thing he wanted was to get on Ran and Ren's bad side; he knew just how much Makoto loved them so he definitely wanted to be liked by them and to get their approval, as odd as that might sound.

At last they were all done with dinner and Ran and Ren set the table while Makoto and his father moved another table from the workshop to their house so everyone could eat comfortably. Mrs. Tachibana served dinner while they all seated themselves at the tables.

"Wow!" Ren gushed, his eyes widening in amazement, "There's so much food!"

"Of course," Mrs. Tachibana said with a gentle smile, "Makoto is back home and we have guests over, so tonight we're having a special celebration dinner."

"You really didn't have to do this for us, ma'am," Rei excused awkwardly, feeling like they had burdened her with their presence.

"Nonsense!" she cut him off, "It's nothing I didn't want to do for you all. If anything, thank Haruka
"I'm sure we will," Nagisa said with an eager smile and he grabbed his cutlery to dig in but Rei stopped him before he could take a bite. "What?"

"You have to wait!"

"On what?" he questioned in confusion, but then he realised something was missing, or rather, someone was missing. Two someones. "Where are Kisumi and Sousuke?"

"I don't know," Makoto muttered as he peered at the clock that hung above the counter, "They should have been here by now; I told them to come at six so they'd be in time for dinner. Maybe I just should have picked them up like I suggested, what if they're lost? I'll go look for them now."

Makoto got up and when he opened the door to make his leave, he was startled when he was met with Kisumi's face right in front of his.

"Kisumi! You scared me," he said with a sigh, lifting his hand to his chest in an attempt to calm down his frantically thumping heart, and he took a step back so he and Sousuke could come inside.

"Sorry we're late!" Kisumi apologised as he walked past Makoto, dragging Sousuke in after him.

"It's alright." Makoto went back to his chair and sat down again while Kisumi and Sousuke washed their hands before they sat down as well. Now they were all here, they could finally start eating before the food got cold and all of his mother's and Haruka's effort went to waste. "What took you so long, though? I thought you said you could find your way back here with no help."

"Well I can find my way back here just fine," Kisumi claimed as he gestured at himself, and then he pointed an accusing finger at Sousuke, "but he on the other hand." He sighed in exasperation. "We were walking back here just fine, I take my eyes off of him for one second and he's disappeared. Gone. Lost in the crowd. I had to look all around for him, and he's lucky he's so tall so he stands out above most folk, otherwise I'm not sure if we would even be here right now. When I found him I made sure to physically drag him here so he couldn't wander off on his own again."

"Sorry," Sousuke mumbled with a hint of embarrassment and he stared down at his plate, avoiding everyone's gaze. It was amusing to think that a man who was training to be a knight, who was big and strong and seemed so intimidating had such a terrible sense of direction. In hindsight, Makoto was very glad that they chose to let Kisumi lead the way back to Sano, otherwise they probably would have gotten terribly lost and they might not have even been here right now.

"Well, all that matters is that you found your way back safely and that you're here now," Mrs. Tachibana thought, not wanting them to dwell on it any longer since it couldn't be helped either way. She smiled reassuringly at Sousuke, trying to put him at ease and prevent him from feeling too guilty about it. "Now, shall we eat?"

Dinner was very different from how it had been these past couple of days for Makoto. Not only the food - which was now a far less deluxe and a lot simpler yet tasted like home and love - but mainly the ambience in that hung in the small room was incredibly contrasting to the ones Makoto had experienced in Iwatobi. The first dinner there had been stiff, awkward and out of place and the meals he had with Haruka alone were calm and tender yet still so exciting and full of warmth and comfort. But now there was the familiarity of his family and his environment, the liveliness of
conversation that he was so used to but for once it didn't serve to make the meal they were having less meager - and the fact that he didn't have to pay too much attention to his manners and the proper etiquette was also wonderful. He had missed the comfort of eating dinner with his parents and siblings and how normal it was to sit here at the table in the house in which he was born, in the town where he grew up, in the kingdom he spent his everyday life.

Though it was far from normal now, because he was not only joined by his family but by his friends as well - and his more-than-friend. But that wasn't a bad thing at all, because even if it wasn't like how it usually was, it was like a mixture of his favourite elements of all the meals he'd ever had; the taste of home with the added flavours of companionship and adoration.

And fortunately, he wasn't the only one who experienced this: the atmosphere was amicable and the conversation was friendly, and even Haruka was smiling softly and commenting here and there, still shooting him the occasional look of affection that his eyes had also held during previous meals they shared with each other.

Makoto had been afraid that he would feel uncomfortable, not only because of the unfamiliar place and people, but also the different customs and complete lack of protocol were things that he wasn't used to at all; Makoto felt uncomfortable in Iwatobi at first too, so he could definitely understand it if Haruka felt that way about his home and Sano in general. Even if he wanted Haruka to be comfortable here and feel a little at home as well, he knew that it wasn't odd for him to feel the exact opposite. So he was pleasantly surprised to see that even if Haruka didn't seem to be as open as he was when they were alone, he wasn't completely shutting himself out due to discomfort either.

Once all their plates had been cleared, Mrs. Tachibana served the cakes that Nagisa and Rei had brought and if dinner hadn't been great enough for the twins already, dessert made the evening absolutely mind-blowing and completely unforgettable. It wasn't mentioned to them before so it would be a surprise, and they were so excited that it made Makoto's heart burn with fondness and pain - fondness because he was so glad he got to see them happily enjoying this treat, and pain because this was something that was so simple and yet made them immensely happy because they never got it otherwise because it was an unnecessary luxury they couldn't afford, and it made Makoto feel bad that he couldn't give them this usually, not even every once in a while.

He tried to push those thoughts away for now, because tonight they would just enjoy the dinner and company of their guests, savouring every bite and every second.

Since having cake for dessert - and having dessert at all - was such a rare and unusual occasion, Ran and Ren couldn't decide if they wanted a slice of the strawberry cake or the chocolate cake, not wanting to miss out on the taste of either. To spoil them, Mrs. Tachibana cut them a thin slice of both so they didn't have to choose and could enjoy it to the fullest. It seemed like Makoto's mother was feeling the same way he did and therefore chose to let them indulge themselves and be a little greedy for once, since she usually couldn't spoil them like she wished she could do. And indulging they did; soon the corners of their mouths were stained with frosting and chocolate as they merrily chewed on their treat.

Makoto obviously chose for a piece of the chocolate cake since Haruka had gone and picked it especially for him, but he had to admit he was curious to know how the strawberry one tasted as well. It wasn't just something new to the twins after all, because it was still a luxury to him as well despite having experienced the food that the chefs in Iwatobi made for the royal family, since it hadn't been frequent enough for him to get used to it already so tonight felt a little special to him too.
Like his mind had been read, a fork soon entered his field of vision and he unconsciously opened his mouth to accept the bite, the flavour of strawberry and sugary frosting strong on his tongue as he chewed. When his eyes followed the line of the offering arm he was met with a soft smile on a small mouth and ocean blue eyes staring through his soul; although he wasn't a fan of sweet things in general, Haruka had purposely picked the sweet strawberry cake so Makoto could have a taste of it too and Makoto's heart practically turned to sugar and melted inside his chest.

To return the favour, Makoto cut off a piece of his chocolate slice with the side of his fork and offered it so Haruka could try this cake as well. Without a word Haruka accepted the gesture before chewing thoughtfully, and it wasn't until Makoto could hear the muted chuckles coming from around the table that he realised what they had just done like it was second nature, completely forgetting that they weren't alone. It was a little embarrassing, but it was just so easy to forget that other people even existed when he looked at Haruka; like he was the biggest star glowing brightly just for him, blinding him by outshining all others. Fortunately, no one decided to comment on it so Haruka and Makoto were spared from any more shame.

When they had all eaten their fill, Mrs. Tachibana put all the plates on the counter and made another round of tea. Haruka had offered to help her out with the dishes, after which the other guests chimed in with proposals of assistance as well but Mrs. Tachibana whisked them all away and told them that she and her husband would do the dishes later.

The conversation continued over cups of steaming tea and it wasn't until the sun was starting to sink below the horizon that it ended with Rei announcing that the time had come for them to take their leave; it was getting late and it would be best if they went to bed so they could get a good night's rest because they would definitely need it tomorrow, especially since none of them had slept well these past few days. They all agreed because his words made sense. Both parties said goodbye to each other along with expressions of gratitude and wishes of good fortune in the future. Nagisa jokingly said that it wasn't a farewell and that he would be back for dinner tomorrow, to which Mr. and Mrs. Tachibana simply replied that he, and everyone else, would always be welcome in their home.

Makoto offered to walk them back to the inn and no one objected because his intention behind it was as clear as water. Kisumi led the way back - keeping a close eye on Sousuke so he wouldn't wander off on his own again - and the others walked beside him, save for Haruka and Makoto who trailed a little behind. A comfortable silence settled between them as they exchanged the occasional yet meaningful look, not needing any words to fill up the air to convey the affections and the longing that burned inside their chests for one another.

When they arrived at the inn, Makoto knew that the time had come for them to part ways and the mere thought of it made inexplicable emptiness coil in his stomach. Even though he would surely see Haruka - and Nagisa, Rei, and Sousuke - again soon, it still felt odd in a way that he failed to understand.

"Well then," he started awkwardly to open up the conversation, "I suppose this is it." The moment those words left his lips, he regretted them. It wasn't like he would never see them again, so why was he acting like he was? In an attempt to come back to what he actually wanted to tell them, he decided to cut to the chase right away. "Good luck tomorrow, I hope everything will work out. I'll definitely be thinking of you, I'm not sure if that will help out but-
"

"Wait," Nagisa interrupted, furrowing his eyebrows in confusion at Makoto's words, "You're not coming with us tomorrow?"

"Of course not," Makoto responded in bewilderment, frowning as well because he didn't
understand the misconception on Nagisa's end, "It would hardly be appropriate for me to come. Besides, I have to work tomorrow anyway."

"You have to work tomorrow? But tomorrow is a Sunday!" Nagisa objected but Makoto only shrugged in response. He had always been under the impression that Sunday was the day off of work for the common folk, but apparently he had been wrong. Still, the notion of Makoto having to work tomorrow confused Nagisa greatly. "But I thought that the payment Rei gave you…"

Nagisa didn't finish his sentence in fear of looking even dumber than he already was right then because Makoto simply shook his head in response.

"The payment Rei gave us was enough for us to never have to worry again," Makoto explained patiently for he knew it wasn't Nagisa's fault he was ignorant on the matter, "So we'll have a backup in case something happens, like if we don't make enough money one day but we still need to get food, or if someone suddenly gets sick and we need medicine, but it's not enough for us to live off of so we can't just stop working." Nagisa's confusion gave Makoto the impression that he didn't fully realise how expensive it was to live, so Makoto elaborated, "You can't live off of savings, because it's not just food we have to pay for, there's also taxes, the mortgage, water and electricity, Ran and Ren's school and the school supplies, the materials for the shop, fabric and, if anything breaks, tools or furniture and… so much more," he ended sheepishly when he noticed he was rambling.

"Oh… right."

"We'll come back tomorrow," Haruka suddenly said as if Nagisa had never interrupted Makoto in the first place - Nagisa didn't know if he spoke because he wanted to save him from more embarrassment or for another reason, but he appreciated Haruka's diversion all the same. "I don't know how much time it will take, but we'll come back as soon as we have an answer from King and Queen Hazuki."

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto murmured in acknowledgement, glad about that prospect because he was dying to know whether or not the plans would go through the way they discussed them and if Nagisa and Rei were allowed to be together at last - and perhaps a little because he wanted to see Haruka as soon as possible again too. "I really appreciate that."

"I don't think I'll come back along tomorrow," Kisumi chimed in, disrupting the connecting gaze that Haruka and Makoto had been captured in with a somewhat awkward smile. "They'll probably put me right back to work tomorrow so…"

Makoto understood what he was trying to say and he turned to Kisumi, knowing that even if this wasn't his goodbye to the others, it was to Kisumi. "Thank you for everything, Kisumi," Makoto thanked sincerely as he hugged him in a gesture of gratitude and friendship, "We never could have done this without you and I'll always be grateful to you. Thank you so much."

Kisumi laughed at Makoto's sentimental words and he pulled back, "Why are you thanking me like I'm going to die?"

"Oh, that wasn't my intention!" Makoto frantically waved his hands in front of his body in dismissal and defense. "I just am really grateful to you. I really appreciate all that you did for us, what you did for me specifically. I'll never forget what you said to me."

Those words made Kisumi smirk and he whispered, "Told you everything would be alright," under his breath and he winked at Makoto, but then he raised his voice and said, "Still, you're making it sound like you'll never see me again. Believe me, you won't get rid of me this easily. After all, am
I not invited to the wedding?" Before Haruka had the chance to mutter 'no', he quickly followed his teasing up with, "Besides, I think you still got something that belongs to me."

When Makoto saw him running his eyes over his body, he looked down as well and that was when he realised he was still wearing Kisumi's suit. "Right! I'm sorry, I completely forgot!" It was almost as if he had gotten used to taking constricted breaths and being unable to move his arms properly. "I'll wash them and return them soon, and the boots-"

"Keep the boots," Kisumi cut in, "They don't fit me anyway, and I actually did buy them for you; you can keep the clothes too but that would be a waste since they don't really fit you anyway."

"Thanks," Makoto chuckled, not finding it a loss that he had to give Kisumi's clothing back. On the contrary, he was rather relieved that he wouldn't have to wear such tight garments again in the future; even if he had been used to wearing boots that were too small, his mother always purposefully made his clothes a size or two bigger so he would grow into them and could still fit into them by the time she made new ones - although she was not always prepared enough for his sudden growth spurts, his own clothing would still fit much better than Kisumi's had.

"That reminds me!" Rei suddenly said, smacking his hand with his fist in recollection, "Your garments are still at the palace. I'll make sure to return them to you tomorrow."

"Thanks," Makoto repeated, snorting lightly at the memory of his arrival at the palace earlier that week in his sleeping wear.

"Well then," Kisumi concluded with his charming smile, "Goodnight, Makoto. See you later!" Without waiting for a response, he made his way to the door, dragging Rei and Nagisa in after him, who quickly muttered their own expressions of departure and wishes of goodnight but were drowned out by Kisumi mumbling, "Come on, let the lovebirds have a moment alone."

Those words made a fierce blush dust Makoto's cheeks and Haruka averted his eyes, staring pointedly at his feet and he didn't look up until Sousuke had reluctantly left as well and the door to the inn closed behind him.

When their eyes met, a bashful smile stretched Makoto's face because he wasn't quite sure what to say to Haruka. Usually his eyes would just convey what he felt without him having to find the right words to express himself with, but now he felt the need to actually say something aloud.

Apparently Haruka felt the same way, because he seemed to be deep in thought before he softly murmured, "Thank you." When Makoto raised his eyebrows in a questioning look, he clarified, "For today. For showing me your home, for letting me meet your family, for being open and honest with me."

Makoto's smile softened in understanding, warmth surging through his heart. "Thank you, too," he chuckled lightly in gratitude for his trust, but then his voice turned a little more serious to make sure his words sounded as earnest as he intended them to be. "Good luck tomorrow, Haru. Thank you for wanting to do this for them."

"I'm not sure if I'll be able to make it happen, but I'll try my best."

Haruka's words had been shy and somewhat nervous but there was still a sliver of determination hidden in them. "I know you will," Makoto replied confidently, making a tiny smile bloom on Haruka's lips, "I'm sorry there's not much I can do to help, but I'll definitely keep hoping and thinking about you tomorrow." He wrapped his arms around Haruka's shoulders and pressed his lithe body against his in the promise he had made to himself earlier that day.
Naturally Haruka's arms wound themselves around Makoto's back as he buried his face into Makoto's chest, holding him tightly and he sighed in contentment. "Just your support is enough," he whispered almost inaudibly, but Makoto had heard him anyway, had felt the words resonating through their embrace and he couldn't stop himself from placing the tiniest of kisses against Haruka's temple in response.

They stood there for a while, holding each other close as time ticked by because neither of them wanted to be the first one to let go, wanting to hold on for as long as the other would allow it. Being inside the other's arms just felt so comfortable and right and it would be foolish of them to break away prematurely, when the other still had more warmth and affection to offer. When they realised that the other was thinking the same, they both chuckled a little at how much their hearts were on the same page. Even though they wouldn't have had any complaints to stay in this position for hours on end and would have enjoyed every second of it, they knew that wasn't wisest thing they could do and that they were unfortunately going to have to pull away at some point soon.

With one deep breath Haruka tightened his arms once more and squeezed Makoto lightly as he nuzzled his face into Makoto's chest before he straightened his back and neck, yet keeping his arms locked around Makoto.

Their gazes met and Makoto could see the same joy and fondness twinkling in those breathtakingly blue eyes that he felt inside every fiber of his being and he smiled down at Haruka in adoration. "Goodnight, Haru," Makoto sighed, his voice barely above a whisper, yet his grip on Haruka remained as well.

A sweet smile appeared on Haruka's face and he got up on his toes before he pressed a kiss against Makoto's cheek on the same place he had a few days before. Yet this time, it wasn't small and fleeting; it lingered so Makoto could truly feel it, so that even after they parted ways, he could feel it imprinted in his skin.

When Haruka pulled back, he didn't flee from embarrassment like he had the first time his lips met Makoto's cheek. Instead, he smiled at Makoto again before getting back onto his feet. "Goodnight, Makoto."

With reluctance they let each other go and Haruka stepped towards the door of the inn, grabbing the handle of the door. Before he pushed it open, he turned back and waved at Makoto, who waved back and his adoring smile never wavered, even as he saw Haruka disappearing into the inn and the large door falling shut behind him.

He raised his hand and touched the spot Haruka had kissed, smiling to himself as he stared at the door Haruka had just gone through before he turned around. With a heavy yet happy heart, Makoto began to walk back to his house.

Haruka really was too cute for his own good.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed!

One thing I want to mention, though, is that I always tried to update on or around the birthdays of the main four boys; I have been able to keep this up until now and posted around the birthdays of Haruka, Nagisa, and now Makoto, but I can already say
beforehand that I won't have the next chapter out on Rei's birthday (December 14th.) Although I have already started chapter 7 I'm only about 5k in right now and I know I won't have it done before then; I used to have the advantage that I already had the next chapter done by the time I posted one, but because I did want to update around Makoto's birthday, I now lost that headstart. This will mean that it will take me even longer to get the next chapters out and I hope you understand that, but I promise I'll still do my best to get the entire fic out as soon as I can.

As always, you can find me on Tumblr or Twitter @DatHeetJoella if you have any questions or comments or you simply want to talk with me.

Thank you again, I wish you a lovely day and I hope to see you again at the next chapter!
Chapter Summary

While Haruka and Nagisa had an audience with King and Queen Hazuki, Makoto's daily life resumed from where it left off.

Chapter Notes

It's been quite some time since I posted the last chapter of this fic, and it was honestly never my intention for this chapter to take so long. This past year and a half I've been distracted a lot by events and gifts, but I never lost my love for this fic and my other ongoing multi chapters and always planned to get back to them when everything quieted down. That time has finally come, and I'm excited to present this chapter to you on Nagisa's birthday. Happy birthday, Nagisa!

There are a couple of things that have changed since the last time I updated this fic:

I bumped up the chapter count from 8 to 13. As I was writing this chapter, I soon realised that there was no way I could fit all that was left in this story in only two chapters. I pondered about adding a sequel to this fic, but that didn't feel right as I do think this is all still part of the main story. So based on a new planning, I now estimate the fic to have 13 chapters in total. This is a rough estimate though, and as I've proven to myself countless of times in the past, this is subject to change. It's just to give you an idea of how much more you can expect of this fic.

I added chapter titles and summaries to all the previous chapters and the upcoming chapters will have them too. It's something that I've been thinking about adding for a while now, and with this update, I finally had the opportunity to. I hope this will add to the reading experience. Nothing about the previous chapters has changed apart from this, so there's no need to go back to read the whole fic if it's still fresh in your mind.

Besides that, this chapter is a bit shorter than the previous chapters, because I decided to split this chapter up into two separate chapters. I meant to write chapters that were shorter not only to make them more digestible, but also so I could put them out faster. But it turned out that it ended up being just as long as my average chapter, and because there's quite a lot of different scenes, I felt like it was best to split it up. This means that the next chapter is already done and the wait for that one definitely won't take as long as this one has, haha.

That's enough from me for now, so I hope you enjoy this long overdue chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That morning, Makoto was not stirred from his slumber by Ran and Ren like he normally was. It wasn't the light hitting his face that had caused him to wake up either, and it certainly wasn't a servant knocking on the door to bring him his breakfast. For the first time in as long as he could
remember, he woke up all by himself.

When he turned to lie on his back, he was met with the familiar wooden ceiling he hadn't seen since the start of this week. The sight of it disoriented him a bit, and for a moment he was scared that it had all been a dream; that these past couple of days with Haruka had been nothing more than figments of his imagination and panic shot through his body at the thought of it.

Fortunately, those doubts didn't linger. As the remnants of sleep dissolved and his mind cleared up, he knew it was all real. Meeting Haruka, growing closer to him, feeling things that he had never felt before, it happened and he was there to experience every moment. Though this whole scenario was straight out of his wildest fantasies, the memory of Haruka's soft lips brushing tenderly against his own and sliding his fingertips over his smooth skin was far too vivid to be a dream. A simple mind like his could never conjure up someone as amazing as Haruka.

Unlike most mornings, there was no reluctance to leave his bed nor dread for the day ahead of him now. All that was on his mind was Haruka and the wonderful time he'd spent with him, a goofy, enamoured smile naturally lighting up his face as he was flooded with an after wave of happiness.

Alas, this warm feeling was short-lived. When he heard the clinking of plates and the muted sound of voices coming from the kitchen, he was brought back to reality. No matter how great this past week might have been, he was back home now and though he was glad to be, that meant his daily life resumed from where it left off. He couldn't float on these feelings, because he had to work today.

He never minded manual labour, but he had to admit that dancing with Haruka and taking a stroll through a beautiful garden sounded far more appealing than carrying heavy crates from one end of the town to the next or forging a knife. Even singing the same old songs over and over at the town square didn't quite match up to serenading Haruka in a large ballroom. If only those precious days could have lasted forevermore.

That wasn't the only factor that took the warmth away though. The instant he remembered that today was the day that Haruka was going to negotiate with King and Queen Hazuki in the hopes of securing a future for Nagisa and Rei, anxiety began to coil in his stomach.

He had no influence whatsoever, but he couldn't help but be nervous on behalf of Rei and Nagisa, but Haruka especially. The future of their friends depended on Haruka's ability to debate and persuade and knowing that was not a light burden to bear. Makoto dearly wished he could have been there to shoulder it for him. Haruka often struggled to find the right words and therefore he preferred to let his actions speak for him, but that was not an option this time. Despite him probably being prepared for negotiations with other kingdoms for his future as king, he didn't have the advice and support of others to guide him through this conversation.

Of course, Nagisa was there, but Makoto didn't think the king and queen would be sensitive to their son's attempts at convincing them. Based on what he heard from Nagisa, they did not value his opinion much and expected him to obey them without protest. That meant that it was all up to Haruka.

Makoto wanted to do anything within his might to help them out, but sadly there was nothing he could do but hope and wait.

With a sigh, he pushed himself up, stretched his muscles and got out of bed. It wasn't like lying around with a head full of worries was going to benefit Haruka in any way, so he should get to work. If he fell back into his daily routine, he might be able to clear his mind a little. Judging by the sounds still coming from the kitchen, it was time for breakfast anyway.
When he got to the main room, he was surprised to see that all the chairs were empty and only his mother was standing at the counter, already busying herself with the dishes. Upon hearing the floorboards creak to announce his presence, she turned around and greeted him with her default smile.

"Good morning, Makoto," she sang, seeming more cheerful than she had in a long time. She ceased scrubbing the plate she was holding in favour of drying off her hands with a towel. "Sit down, I'll get you your breakfast."

"Good morning," Makoto mumbled as he sat down in his usual spot like she told him to, but doing so with confusion. "Where are Dad and the twins?"

"Dad just went back to the shop," she said with a nod towards the adjoint workplace, then she put a plate of yesterday's leftovers down in front of him. "And the twins are at school."

"At school?" Makoto asked with a frown. They always had breakfast together as a family before school started and the shops opened. The absence of his father and siblings combined with the fact that his mother was already cleaning up meant that it was he who was later than usual. "What time is it?"

"Around nine-thirty."

"Nine-thirty?" he yelped in shock, eyes widening in disbelief. "Why didn't you wake me earlier?"

"You needed the rest," his mother shrugged, "it's not bad to sleep in every once in a while."

"But I have to."

"Work isn't going to run away if you're a bit later than usual," she cut in, wiping his protests from the table before he could put them there. "There will be plenty of hours left to work once you're done. Take your time to eat your breakfast and get ready before you leave."

He knew his mother was right, but he couldn't help but feel a bit guilty that he couldn't utilise every minute of the day to contribute to the household income. Admittedly, he had been really fatigued because of the past week, physically but also mentally. These few extra hours of sleep had done a good job at recharging him, as he felt far more energetic than he did most days. Because of that, he was grateful for his mother's thoughtfulness. "Thanks, Mom."

His mother smiled and then she faced away from him to continue scrubbing the plate. "I'll be at the Matsuoka's place all day, so you can stop by if you need anything."

"I will," Makoto assured and he eagerly dug in.

About fifteen minutes later, Makoto was getting ready to leave. He had wasted no time scarfing down the cold yet nonetheless tasty meal before he freshened himself up in their tiny but still properly functional bathroom.

He got dressed in his own simple, fitted clothing, but he did put on the boots that Kisumi had gotten him. He had no other choice; his old ones were still at the palace where he had left them at the start of the week. Not that he minded it, not at all. These boots were far more comfortable and appeared to be a lot more durable than his old pair. They didn't tire out his feet as much after walking around for the majority of the day, courtesy of the thicker, sturdier soles. This seemed like something small, but it made the difference between being tired at the end of the day and being
absolutely exhausted. In his head, he thanked Kisumi again for getting them for him.

Because Kisumi's garbs weren't as much of a success, he folded them as neatly as he could and stuffed them into his bag. He'd make sure to give them to Nagisa when they inevitably came to tell him the outcome of the conversation, be it good or bad. Until then, he would hold onto them with crossed fingers.

He kissed his mother goodbye before he went to the workplace to greet his father and see if there was anything he required assistance with. Like he had been anticipating, that was not the case. So he put on his hat and slung his bag over his shoulder, leaving his home behind in the hopes of finding work elsewhere.

As with every Sunday morning, there were quite some folks out and about. It was gradually heating up, and Makoto figured it wouldn't be much longer until the blinding rays of the sun chased everyone away to find refuge inside.

Hot summers like these used to be good for business, as a lot of people felt much too lethargic to do their chores or run their errands and would gladly pay a small amount to have someone else do it for them. Nowadays, they instead made sure to finish what they had to do before the sun was at its peak. He hoped that there were still some left with a job to do and a coin to spare.

After strolling around town for a good while, having inquired at all his usual addresses and at many others too, he concluded that today was another one of those days. Nothing to do and nowhere needed. Sunday had always been the lowest day of the week, but the amount of errand offers were rapidly decreasing even during weekdays. With every rejection, Makoto felt more and more disheartened.

The savings they had been able to put aside because of what happened this past week might prevent them from going hungry today, but it wasn't going to last forever. It was a short term solution to a long term problem and with the way things were going here in Sano, it seemed like the situation was only going to get worse. They might be able to keep their heads above the water for now, but if this issue was lasting, it would cause them to sink sooner or later.

This was another reason why he so desperately wished that Haruka would be able to convince King and Queen Hazuki. The benefits of a possible alliance between Sano and Iwatobi would improve the economy in Sano greatly; it seemed like the only way to lighten this crisis that had taken its toll on the middle and lower class and made the average poor and the poor even poorer.

The prospect of this arranged marriage had been a tiny flame of hope for him, but word wasn't out to the general public yet. If it weren't for him meeting Nagisa, he would have only seen the darkness that lurked ahead, and this was the reality of many folks around the entire realm. Frankly, this was the only chance of improvement for countless of people here in Sano. If the negotiations didn't go as planned, then Makoto knew the future for everyone, including his family and him, looked very grim.

A possible future together with Haruka was the only beacon of light in that case, but Makoto didn't dare to get ahead of himself and count on that. Haruka was free to change his mind at any time and even if he didn't, the circumstances weren't exactly in their favour.

Yet his smitten mind couldn't help but imagine what a life spent with Haruka would be like. It would solve all of his problems and make him the happiest person in the entire world at the same time. The downside would be that only his family was helped by a relationship between Haruka and him, but if he were brutally honest, that was what mattered the most. His family was always his number one priority and he worked and fought for them above all others, regardless of how
much he liked the folks around town and wished them well.

Things hadn't gotten to that point yet, though. For now, he had to do everything he could to regain Haruka's trust and prove to him that he was worthy of his forgiveness, that his feelings for him were true. Then, Haruka could decide if he wanted this too or not. In the meanwhile, he had to make sure to keep providing for his family in case things didn't turn out the way he wanted them to.

With those conflicting thoughts, Makoto stopped by the last place he would ask today before he'd go home to get his guitar. Sadly, he received a negative answer this time too and he couldn't stop the dejection from showing on his face. When the woman in question saw his crestfallen expression, she assured him that if she ever needed someone to run an errand for her, he would be the first person she'd ask. Knowing she was just saying it out of politeness, this was far from comforting, but Makoto did his best to smile and thank her sincerely.

It couldn't be helped, so he began to make his way back home. All that was left to do was to go to the town square and try to make a little there so this day wouldn't be completely unproductive. Singing was far more effective on days like these than going from door to door only to be shut down without making a single coin, so anything was welcome at this point.

As he walked past Matsuoka's Fitted Garments, he was suddenly reminded of the promise he made to Gou yesterday. Because he didn't know when he would have the opportunity to fulfill that promise, he decided he might as well stop by now. He had already wasted plenty of time, might as well waste some more now rather than on a busy day. His mother was here today, so when he would tell Rin, Gou and Mrs. Matsuoka the reason behind his abrupt disappearance, she would be there to support him in case they found the story so outrageous that they couldn't believe their ears.

With that in mind, Makoto entered the tailor shop.

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Impatience, relief, exhaustion and excitement. Those were the feelings that dominated Haruka's mind as they were on the way back to town.

He still couldn't believe that he had actually been able to pull it off. Not only had King and Queen Hazuki agreed to cancel the arrangement in favour of an alliance without a marriage, after a lot of persuasion, insistence, but mainly bluff, they also gave Nagisa and Rei permission to tie the knot. It hadn't been easy, and he knew this was only the start. An obstacle far more difficult to defeat stood between them and their happiness: his own parents.

Those worries were for later though, for he allowed himself to celebrate this victory before he would brace himself for the toughest battle yet. He was relieved and happy for Nagisa and Rei, and he couldn't wait to tell Makoto about all that had happened.

When they were heading towards the palace that morning, they discussed the course of action. It would be bad if Nagisa and he accidentally stated something contradictory and demolish their credibility, so they needed a solid story of what supposedly went down this past week.

They instantly decided that they would not go with the truth. The whole point of sending Makoto was to make sure the king and queen wouldn't find out that their son had run away, so they definitely wouldn't tell them about Nagisa's exit and Makoto's appearance. Anything that could potentially jeopardise the chances of them letting Nagisa marry Rei was not an option.
Haruka did make a mental note that if everything worked out, he had to prevent his parents from becoming too chummy with King and Queen Hazuki. When the time came, he obviously couldn't tell them the same nonsensical story because they had already met Makoto in Nagisa's stead.

As soon as they arrived at the palace, Nagisa requested an official meeting with his parents. The servants were visibly startled by their arrival, but they informed the king and queen without any questions asked. Rei, Sousuke and Kisumi waited outside while Haruka and Nagisa went to meet with King and Queen Hazuki.

To say they were surprised to see their son and supposed son-in-law would have been an understatement. It was easy to tell that Haruka's presence intimidated them a little, and though he usually disliked people treating him differently because of his status and title, he knew he had to use it to their advantage now. He decided to forgo the pleasantries and cut right to the chase; he only had a limited amount of time in Sano and he'd rather spend it with Makoto than with King and Queen Hazuki.

He gave them a brief summary of how Nagisa had arrived at the palace and how they had spent their time together. Over the course of a few days, they gradually discovered that, though they enjoyed the other's presence, there were only feelings of friendship between them and nothing more. They were arranged to marry each other, but both of their hearts belonged to someone else. Therefore, they would much rather continue a strictly platonic relationship and engage themselves romantically with those they actually loved.

Nagisa had told him that the situation in Sano was a major reason behind the arrangement, so Haruka wanted to try to make all that accompanied the arrangement pass, just without the marriage itself. Thus, they had come to Sano to discuss these plans with them, King and Queen Hazuki.

At first, King and Queen Hazuki were very hesitant to cancel the arrangement as it was, as they simply didn't see any reason to. In their eyes, Nagisa and Haruka were princes who had to fulfill their duty whether they liked it or not, and if they didn't love each other now, they would grow to do so eventually.

Having already expected this kind of reaction, Haruka made sure to inform them that regardless of what they decided to do, his own parents were already planning to call it all off. Their sole motivation behind arranging a marriage for their son was to ensure their royal bloodline would be continued. With Princess Nagisa. That very instance, they were in another monarchy to look for a maiden suitable to take Nagisa's place. If they found one, then all what they had agreed on with the kingdom of Sano would be thrown away without second thought. Haruka wanted to prevent that from happening, so this was the solution that he offered; it was this, or nothing at all.

With lingering reluctance, they agreed to cancel the wedding. Haruka made sure to tell them not to mention any of this to their people nor the people in Iwatobi until they got official word from his parents - after all, everything that Haruka was selling was pure bluff. Getting King and Queen Hazuki to agree to this was the easy part, for the real challenge lied within convincing his own parents and their councillors to follow through with it.

He had some influence as the crown prince, but he was no king yet and only had a small say in what would happen. Considering the benefits for his own kingdom were small and pretty insignificant, he was sure his parents and their advisors would be a lot less eager about this than King and Queen Hazuki were. But he would deal with them later, for he had to focus on accomplishing his objectives one conversation at a time.

Then it was time for the most challenging part of these negotiations to be addressed: Nagisa and Rei's relationship. To maintain a friendly and light atmosphere, Haruka brought a marriage
between them up like it was a mere suggestion.

It immediately became clear that the king and queen were not too fond of that notion. They said that, while Rei was a kind and reliable man who would make for a good husband, it was simply not proper for a prince to be together with him. It was nothing personal, but they could not allow their child to get married to a servant. They reasoned that now they had reached an agreement with Iwatobi without a marriage, this was an opportunity to strengthen the bonds with another kingdom through marriage.

This was something that Nagisa and Haruka had anticipated too. Thus, they were necessitated to take a different course of action. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

While it was not his favoured manner, Haruka knew that he had no other choice but to manipulate King and Queen Hazuki. He explained that they had misunderstood him when he had suggested it before; Nagisa's relationship with Rei being condoned was a vital term in the arrangement with Iwatobi. If they chose to marry Nagisa off to someone else, then the deal was through and there would be no more negotiations or possible alliance between Iwatobi and Sano.

Of course, they were free to decide what they valued more, a bond with Iwatobi without a marriage or a bond with another kingdom through marriage. But Haruka made sure to remind them of the fact that there was no realm anywhere near that was wealthier or more influential than Iwatobi, that an alliance with Iwatobi therefore benefited the people of Sano more than one with any other kingdom. If they rejected his offer this time, then Haruka guaranteed them that there would no more attempts at reconciliation for as long as he reigned.

None of this was easy for him to say. Abusing his power and forcing others to comply with his demands felt downright immoral, but it was necessary to achieve their goal. Never before had he felt the need to fight for something like he did now, and he knew it was worth all the discomfort and struggle he went through. That didn't change the fact that he felt like he would implode with every lie that left his lips, though.

Nagisa wasn't much of a help either, but Haruka couldn't exactly blame him. He knew Nagisa didn't dare to interrupt in fear of ruining things for himself and Rei. That being said, a bit more support was welcome. He wasn't used to bargaining, especially not on his own, and he highly doubted that he would ever get used to it. It was draining and troublesome and it made him feel awful, but he had to finish what he had started; he would not leave this palace until Nagisa and Rei got the royal family's seal of approval.

Fortunately, Haruka was able to retain his stoic demeanour throughout the entire conversation. Everything that left his mouth was pure bluff, but King and Queen Hazuki didn't know that his words were all empty threats. Therefore they needed some time to seriously consider all he had proposed and demanded.

Even if Haruka didn't exactly like the fact that others viewed him as cold and heartless, he couldn't deny that it worked to his advantage at times like these. Arguably, going to such lengths to ensure the happiness of two boys he barely knew proved him to be anything but that.

This was something that King and Queen Hazuki noticed as well, and they were curious to know why he was so adamant about their son being allowed to marry his tutor. Haruka smiled at that and claimed that he had grown rather fond of Nagisa, that he wanted him to be happy with the person he loved. That was not the main reason behind it, though; he himself had fallen for someone whom society deemed was an inappropriate partner as well.

He described how, when out on a personal trip here in Sano, he met a street musician who had
caught his interest. Though their time together was limited, every minute they got to spend together was absolutely wonderful and even after returning to Iwatobi, he had been unable to forget him. As the days passed, he came to the realisation that he had developed feelings for the musician that were deeper than anything he had ever experienced before.

When he met Nagisa shortly thereafter, they discovered they were in the same boat. Neither of them were willing to try to make this arrangement work for they were both devoted to someone else. Because Haruka knew that his parents were going to blow off the wedding, as Nagisa could never fulfill the objective they set for him, they decided that they would do anything they could to be together with the ones they loved.

With King and Queen Nanase gone, they had invited Rei and the street musician over to the palace to discuss the situation with them. Coincidentally, Rei was already acquainted with the street musician; he had met him before in the town and they had talked about his brief yet heartfelt romance with Iwatobi's crown prince and how he missed Haruka so. In turn, Rei had shared his own troubles, and it was obvious that this was what all four of them wanted.

That being settled, they thought the best course of action would be for Nagisa and him to help the other convince their family. He was here to uphold his end of their promise, and he needed Nagisa to come back with him to Iwatobi to do his part in convincing Haruka's parents so they could all be together with the person they loved.

After listening to all of his terms and conditions, King and Queen Hazuki requested for them to leave for a short while so they could discuss everything with their advisors.

Outside the room, Rei, Sousuke and Kisumi were still waiting for them - the latter of which should have returned to work by then, but he couldn't leave without knowing the king and queen's answer. They filled them in on what had been discussed and how things were going. No one quite knew what to expect from Nagisa's parents, which made the wait for a response of some sorts even more dreadful. It wasn't quite clear how much time had passed before they were called back inside, but to Nagisa it felt like a new decade had started by the time the door opened again.

After waiting for an undetermined amount of time, they were finally told what conclusion King and Queen Hazuki had reached: they would accept Iwatobi's offer.

When it dawned upon Nagisa what that entailed, an impossibly wide grin stretched his face. He broke protocol and almost smothered his mother in a big and tight hug of gratitude, after which he practically tackled his father to do the same.

For the first time since Haruka met them, they both laughed at their son's burst of excitement. Unlike their stern and steadfast approach during the entire conversation, Nagisa's reaction made them smile in what almost appeared to be satisfaction. It showed Haruka that, though they seemed rooted in their own beliefs, they did genuinely want their son to be happy. He hoped that his own parents would ultimately feel the same way.

Nagisa's father patted him on the head and told him that he should thank his eldest sister instead. It was she who reasoned that a bond with Iwatobi was crucial for the survival of their people, and that it wasn't so bad for him to be together with a servant because the times were changing. In the end, it should not matter who Nagisa was together with, since he was not an immediate heir to the throne.

As the soon-to-be queen of Sano, she had a lot of influence and apparently, she wanted him to be able to marry the person he loved. In a way, she herself had as well; she was married off too, but she hadn't been in love with anyone prior to that and had soon fallen for her fiancé during their
courting days. Whatever her reason might have been, Nagisa never loved his sister more than he did at that exact moment and he knew he was going to thank her personally as soon as he could.

Haruka cleared his throat and allowed a smile to break through his expressionless face as he shook the hands of King and Queen Hazuki to seal their newly-founded alliance. He was obligated to admit that it was far from an official agreement, but he assured them that he would uphold his part of their promise if they kept theirs as well. Soon, a formal meeting would take place and their alliance would be secured through proper documentation.

Still, it was nothing more than bluff. He had no idea if any of this would happen in the near future; the only way he could push this through completely was if he were king, but he didn't know if that would be in two years or ten or, depending on the developments yet to come, never.

He wasn't about to crack at the last second, and he tried to show them his humanity by thanking them with an even wider smile. To regain an amicable ambience, he talked some more with the king and queen about more trivial things, such as his trip to Sano and his current accommodation. But Nagisa couldn't wait a minute longer to share the news with the world and he ran out of the room.

Before Rei could even see him coming, Nagisa's arms were already around his neck as he was yelling incoherent nonsense that told everything there was to know. In an unusual break of character, Rei tightly hugged him back and began to press rapid kisses against his lips, often missing them because of Nagisa's continuous chattering.

When Haruka rejoined them, Nagisa didn't waste a second before he jumped on him too. He rambled on and on about how thankful he was to Haruka and how he would do anything to help him as well.

Haruka should have been used to it by now, but Nagisa's sudden embrace took him by surprise and he unconsciously tensed up. He didn't know what to do except tell him it was alright and patting his back in what he meant for to be a friendly manner.

As the hug was dragged out and Nagisa's stream of confessions about how scared he had been and how relieved he was now didn't stop, Haruka began to grow more and more impatient. He understood like no other that a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders and that he needed to release all his excitement, but Haruka had reached his limit of how long he felt comfortable being held by Nagisa. The way he was squeezing all the oxygen out of his lungs wasn't helping either.

At last, he just had to push Nagisa off himself. The boy in question didn't seem to care as he instantly latched onto Kisumi's neck instead.

Haruka was glad to be free, but the longer Nagisa took to express his happiness, the more annoyed he got. He was mentally exhausted and all he wanted was to go back to town so he could finally see Makoto again and tell him everything.

Perhaps it was a bit odd, but he was starting to miss Makoto a little. They hadn't been apart this long since they met and it honestly felt like a part of himself was missing. If he already felt like this now then he couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like when he inevitably had to return to Iwatobi.

Maybe he was getting annoyed and impatient out of jealousy.

When Rei got the hint that Haruka wanted to leave, he pried Nagisa off of Sousuke - who seemed to be very grateful to be freed from the hug he was unwillingly captured in - and told him that they
should go to let Makoto know as well. Blinded by his eagerness, Nagisa was jogging towards the palace entrance before anyone could as much as blink. Everyone followed after him more composedly, aside from Kisumi, who waved them goodbye as they left.

And that was how he got here, sitting in Rei’s coach as they rode over the cobblestone path that led up to town. Every minute seemed to pass even slower than the previous one and it felt like this twenty-minute ride was taking an eternity.

When he was making small talk with King and Queen Hazuki, they had offered to let him and Sousuke stay over at the palace, but Haruka had politely declined. In hindsight, he was really glad he did. He’d much rather stay at the inn and be a short fifteen minute walk away from Makoto as opposed to staying at the palace and having to travel for about half an hour to reach him.

When they finally entered the town, Haruka was surprised when Rei pulled over at the stables.

"Why are we stopping here?" he asked in confusion. There was no market today so it was possible to ride through the town. Wasn't it much faster if they took the coach to Makoto's house instead of walking there?

Nagisa smirked at his inability to mask his intentions and he sang, "I've got a hunch as to where Makoto is right now."

The way Nagisa phrased what he had said indicated that whatever Haruka had in mind as to Makoto’s current whereabouts was false. Like it was a secret that only Nagisa knew. That confused Haruka more; he knew Makoto was a hard-working man and for him not to be at his family's shop in the middle of the day simply seemed unheard of. Especially considering Makoto had confirmed that he had to work today.

Detecting the questions that were burning on the tip of Haruka's tongue, Nagisa's smirk widened at the frown that was on his face. "Come on," he urged as he grabbed Haruka's hand and yanked him out of the coach.

Once they were both with two feet on the ground, Nagisa took off without a warning and tugged Haruka along with him. The excited glint in his magenta eyes promised Haruka that there would be no detours.

In the distance, he could hear Rei yelling at Nagisa to slow down, but for once Haruka didn't mind Nagisa's enthusiasm and he simply let himself be dragged along.

They weaved their way through the sea of townsfolk and after a little while, Haruka could hear the faintest hints of music drifting through the air. Suddenly everything fell in place and he knew exactly where Nagisa was taking him. His legs began to speed up without his awareness, like his steps were trying to match up to his heartbeat.

It wasn't long before they reached the town square, where a small crowd obscured their vision. Unabashedly, Nagisa pushed their way through the mass until they were at the center and saw what everyone had been gathered around for.

There Makoto stood in front of the steps, his fingers plucking at the strings of his guitar while his lips moved to form the words of the song. It was the same song he had sung for him back in Iwatobi, but the notes sounded slightly different. Like this was how it was meant to sound all along. Though his beautiful voice carried on the melody was undeniably captivating, that wasn't the sole part of him that was enchanting.
At first glance, he seemed like nothing special. His beige shirt and the suspenders he wore to hold his brown trousers up were not unlike those of many men surrounding him, the paperboy hat that sat atop his locks serving only to keep the sunlight from his gemlike eyes. Nothing about his clothing made him stand out; it was his charming aura, the friendliness he emitted and the gentle smile adorning his handsome face that drew everyone in. His voice wasn't any less magnificent, but Haruka was sure that many would buy a ticket just to see him perform even if it hadn't been.

It was a scene straight from one of those storybooks his grandmother used to read him before bedtime. Seeing this snippet of Makoto's daily life made the thumping of Haruka's enamoured heart speed up, his mouth falling open with a small gasp of amazement as he watched how Makoto entertained the masses. Countless of concerts and performances Haruka had attended, but none that were able to touch him like this show of a simple street musician, as many would describe him to be. But he was so much more than that: he was a kind and hardworking man, a loving son and brother, the person who had stolen Haruka's heart.

The lie Haruka told King and Queen Hazuki held a point of truth after all. Had he not been already, then this would have been the moment Haruka fell in love with Makoto.

"Mesmerising, isn't he?"

Nagisa's question pulled Haruka from his spell. It took a great deal of effort to tear his gaze away from the feast that was Makoto's performance, but when he did, he saw the knowing grin Nagisa flashed him.

Haruka simply nodded in response, as there was no use denying it; anyone could tell that Makoto was incredibly mesmerising. Even without his guitar and pleasant voice, Haruka knew his eyes would instantly spot him in any crowd. He was radiant like the sun, shining brighter than any other star in the galaxy. Truly one of a kind.

While Nagisa and Haruka marvelled and watched, Makoto hadn't even noticed them, too absorbed in sharing his tale with every ear willing to listen. His focus remained and he did his utmost best to amuse every spectator until the very last note ended.

Haruka was startled out of his trance by loud applause sounding throughout the town square. Determined to show his amazement, Haruka clapped harder than anyone else, drowning out even the whistles that Nagisa blew on his fingers.

Ever so humble, Makoto chuckled and made a slight bow of gratitude. A handful of people approached him to drop a coin or two into the tin cup that was at his feet, and he made sure to thank them with a beaming smile and an appreciative nod of his head.

When most folks that surrounded him were gone, Nagisa was going to run up to Makoto, but Haruka held him back. Urged forward by her mother, a little girl slowly approached Makoto. She was clutching a plucked dandelion behind her back, and Haruka wanted to see what happened next without disturbing her.

Makoto put down his guitar and crouched when she was in front of him, the gentle smile never leaving his face as his mouth moved to speak words Haruka couldn't make out. Then, the little girl got up on her toes and tucked the dandelion behind Makoto's ear. Though he was too far away to hear it, Haruka could feel Makoto's chuckle of endearment resonate through his entire body. Just like that, he was bewitched again.

In a show of thankfulness, Makoto ruffled the girl's hair as he tilted his head, his eyes falling shut with the motion. The interaction ended with that and the little girl quickly went back to her mother.
Seizing his chance, Nagisa shouted, "Makoto!" and ran up to him. Haruka followed after him, albeit a bit slower. Before Makoto could react, Nagisa had lunged himself at him, throwing his arms around his shoulders and not letting go.

"Nagisa!" Makoto yelped in surprise, clearly not having seen the prince coming but catching him on reflex. Thankfully he had already set his guitar down at this point, else Nagisa would have knocked it out of his hands and damaged the decades-old heirloom.

"We did it! My parents agreed to all of our terms! I get to marry Rei!"

When those words got through to Makoto, his eyes widened in disbelief before an immensely wide smile lit up his face. "That's great! That's amazing!" he gushed as he began to spin Nagisa around, unable to contain his elation. Not only would his friends be allowed to be together, the alliance with Iwatobi meant that things were going to get better; this was the best possible outcome for everyone. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Nagisa couldn't do anything but laugh gleefully and freely, and his laughter was so contagious that Makoto simply had to join in. As they spun around the town square, Makoto's hat and gifted flower fell from his head, but both boys were too lost in their happiness to notice or mind it.

Haruka watched the scene before him with a content smile. It was hard to tear his eyes away from the 'Nagisa' he had grown to adore and the real Nagisa, but there was one more thing he had to do. He searched his pockets for his wallet and swiftly dropped a couple of coins into Makoto's cup; the performance was amusing enough for Haruka to empty his wallet right then and there, but he knew he had to spare some money in order to stay here in Sano for the time being. The thought that Makoto's family soon wouldn't have to mind each and every coin anymore was a small comfort.

Rei and Sousuke finally caught up to them then. Unlike the sternness that was on Rei's face when he had called out to Nagisa earlier, there was now a fond smile on his lips as he watched his fiancé being twirled around in Makoto's arms. Sousuke was present physically, but it was quite obvious he was on an entirely different plane of existence mentally.

At last, Makoto stopped spinning, having gotten quite dizzy but no less excited. "I'm so happy for you, Nagisa," he concluded. He put Nagisa down and tightened his arms around his slender body for just a moment. Tears of relief burned in his eyes and he bit his bottom lip to suppress them.

"I am too," Nagisa said, and though joy was ever-present on his soft features, it had never been as genuine as it was now. "It's all thanks to Haru. You should have seen him! He was so cool and composed and mildly threatening and it was amazing!"

Makoto looked up from the embrace and for the first time that day, his eyes met Haruka's. A shy smile curled Haruka's lips at Nagisa's praises - if they could be called that - and Makoto naturally mirrored it. Before he could say anything to him, Rei, who Makoto hadn't even seen yet, spoke up.

"I must admit that I did not expect this result," he uttered, adjusting his spectacles on his nose, "I anticipated that His and Her Majesty would agree to the alliance for they did not have another choice, but I never would have thought that they would give Prince Nagisa and I permission to continue our relationship. Prince Haruka truly exceeded all my expectations."

Although it was clearly meant as a compliment, it was worded sort of backhandedly. "Thanks?" Haruka mumbled with a frown.

Rei instantly realised his slip-up. "I didn't mean to insinuate that I have no faith in your capabilities of bargaining!" he quickly stuttered, "It's just that… I didn't expect anyone to be able to convince
them. From my viewpoint, there was no logical reason for them to agree to it; none of the scenarios I examined in my head had this outcome so didn't dare to dream of it. And I still cannot fathom it now."

His voice cracked as he was overcome with emotion. His spectacles fogged up as warm tears began to roll over his cheeks and he averted his head, magicking a handkerchief out of thin air and wiping at his eyes. No matter how determined he was to keep them at bay, the mere thought of the bright future ahead of him as Nagisa's husband made all the reigns slip out of his hands. So far, it seemed like only engulfing terror and encompassing happiness triumphed over Rei's self-control.

If there was anyone who understood this flood of feelings, it was Makoto. He stepped up to Rei and wrapped his arms around him in the bear-hug he had just released his counterpart of. "Congratulations, Rei," Makoto murmured as he cupped the back of his head with his large hand. "I didn't dare to dream of this outcome either."

"I did!" Nagisa claimed, bouncing around on his feet like a little nymph, "I knew that everything was going to be alright in the end."

"Did Kisumi tell you that?" Makoto chuckled. Pretty much every story has a happy ending. Those words were engraved in his mind, and he was sure that he wasn't the only one whom Kisumi had preached his wisdoms to.

"Yes, but that's not the reason!" Nagisa insisted, "It's because of Haru. If you would have seen how convincing he was, you would have too. He could make me any proposition and I'd probably agree to it."

"Let's hope my parents feel that way too," Haruka sighed, and hearing his lovely voice reminded Makoto that there was no one he'd rather be holding than him.

After checking that Rei had regained somewhat of a composure, he let him go with two pats on his back in favour of turning around and drawing Haruka against his chest. Instantly Haruka's arms wound around him and he buried his face into Makoto's shoulder.

For the first time since their parting last night, complete and utter serenity washed over the both of them. There was nothing that felt as right as embracing each other, and they closed their eyes to feel the other's touch with every fiber of their being.

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto whispered in his ear, his lips brushing against Haruka's silky locks, "Thank you so much."

In response, Haruka only held him tighter. The smell of fire and soot that was permanently laced through Makoto's clothes entered his nose, but Haruka couldn't describe the scent as anything but home. He let out a deep sigh as all his troubles faded away for just a moment.

Finally he understood what his grandmother meant when she used to tell him about home not being a place, but a feeling deep in your chest. And oh, did he feel it; standing in the middle of an unfamiliar town square in a kingdom that wasn't his, enveloped by the arms of a man who he met not even a week prior, he had never felt more at home than he did right then.

Lost in their own world, they had no concept of how long their hug lasted. It wasn't until Rei awkwardly cleared his throat that they broke apart. The promise of more was caressed into their skin as their arms brushed when they tore themselves away from the other.

Between the reunion with Haruka and hearing the best news possible, it was safe to say that all the
dejection and despair Makoto had felt just a few hours ago were eradicated from his mind. Wave after wave of happiness rushed through his veins and it simply had to be expressed or else he would combust.

"Ah, I'm so happy!" he guffawed as he pulled Nagisa in for another brief hug. Next, Rei was the one to be squeezed to death by Makoto's enthusiasm and then, much to his dismay, it was Sousuke's turn. The unexpected, unwanted touch crudely dragged him from whatever land his mind was wandering in.

In complete shock, he stared at Haruka as if to ask him what to do. Haruka just shot him an urging look. Left with no other choice, Sousuke went along with Makoto's whim and gave him a half-hearted pat on the back. To his relief, Makoto's embrace didn't last nearly as long as Nagisa's had earlier, and he was soon released again when Makoto saw it fit to give Haruka another shorter but nonetheless tender hug.

When they ultimately parted once more, Haruka's eye fell on the abandoned hat and flower that had flown from Makoto's head when he was spinning around. He bent down to pick them up. To remove any possible dirt from it, Haruka softly blew on the yellow petals before he placed the flower behind Makoto's ear like the girl who gave it to him did too.

"There," he muttered, forgetting their surroundings as he took a stroll through the forest of Makoto's irises, "I'm sure she wouldn't want you to leave her gift behind."

Then, Haruka dusted off the paperboy hat before it reclaimed its rightful place on Makoto's head. It wasn't as pretty as the crown he had worn when they first met, but Makoto looked just as good in it. In his case, the man made the clothes rather than the other way around.

A sweet smile adorned Makoto's lips at that thoughtful gesture and he fixed the hat so it was firmer in place and wouldn't be swept off again.

"Did a woman give you that dandelion?"

The bewilderment that Rei was unable to disguise in his question startled both Haruka and Makoto back to reality. Makoto couldn't help but snort; Rei might not have seen the interaction, but he should know better than to think that he would accept a romantic gift like that from anyone but Haruka.

"A little girl did," Makoto clarified, "Not everyone is wealthy enough to be able to give money to a street musician, but if they listened to my performance, some folks feel obligated to give me something in return. So they give me anything they can spare, like an apple or an egg, or in this case a flower. It's really not necessary at all, but I do appreciate the thought."

"Aren't dandelions weeds, though?" Nagisa asked sceptically.

"They are classified as such because they are wild and grow anywhere, but dandelions actually quite useful!" Rei stated matter-of-factly, the tutor in him coming to the forefront to give another one of his infamous lectures. "Not only are they completely edible, they are also packed with vitamins and minerals. Aside from their nutritional value, there have been several studies on their medicinal benefits-"

"Um," Makoto cut in sheepishly, "I don't think that's why she gave it to me. A lot of people see them as flowers and think they are pretty, so I think she was just being nice."

"Oh." Afraid to have spoken out of turn, a bashful blush lit up Rei's cheeks. He averted his gaze to
the ground as he pushed up his spectacles again in a nervous habit. "Excuse me, I…"

"It's alright," Makoto brushed off with a shrug, bidding him one of his signature gentle smiles, "It's good advice, so perhaps my mom will have a use for it if I give it to her. Thanks."

"I- You're welcome."

In order to spare Rei from any more embarrassment, Makoto decided to change the subject. He sat down next to his stuff on the stone steps and asked, "So, how did the conversation with the king and queen go?"

"It was nerve wracking!" Nagisa exclaimed, plopping down next to Makoto and staring up at the vast blue sky. "They weren't exactly happy to see us, so it went off to a rough start."

"When we got to the palace, we requested an audience with Nagisa's parents," Haruka added, filling in the gaps Nagisa left in the story. "To say they were surprised at our arrival would be an understatement, but they didn't inquire further until they had lead Nagisa and me into the conference hall, where we sat down around a large, oval table."

Makoto moved his guitar and bag to the ground below him, making room for Haruka to sit down next to him. An offer that Makoto didn't need to make twice. He seated himself on the step as he continued to relay the events of that morning. Rei and Sousuke remained standing the whole time, with Sousuke being semi-on guard while Rei most likely was determined not to dirty his garbs.

Haruka told Makoto everything about the conversation in as much detail as he could remember, for he wanted him to have a clear view on what went down; like he was there to experience it himself. Nagisa chimed in every once in a while with comments of varying significance, but Makoto listened attentively to the story from start to finish, sidetracks included.

An adorable blush tinged both of their cheeks when Nagisa recalled the lie Haruka had fabricated about his motivation behind their trip. Even if it wasn't the whole truth, hearing their feelings being recognised and put into words like that was still odd, for at this point, they weren't quite sure where their relationship was at. After everything that had happened in such a short amount of time, voicing their blooming feelings in the other's presence was frightening. Especially because of the uncertainty of their situation. Talking about it was something they'd rather avoid for the time being, unless it was absolutely necessary.

Thus, Haruka quickly continued about Nagisa and Rei's relationship and how he was able to get King and Queen Hazuki to allow it.

When he heard how Haruka practically blackmailed his rulers into condoning their son's relationship with his servant, Makoto couldn't help but laugh. "I'm not surprised they agreed to all your terms when you put it like that," he giggled. "Being threatened like that, they didn't exactly have any other choice, did they?"

It was obvious that he had been rather menacing, but hearing Makoto describe his actions like that made the bad feeling that had coiled in Haruka's stomach resurface. He knew there was no ill will in Makoto's words, yet he couldn't stop the guilt from creeping up to him. "It couldn't be helped," he mumbled with a pout.

"I know," Makoto assured, smiling gently at his prince, "In this case, the end definitely justifies the means. You really did great, Haru."

As always, seeing that cute expression on Makoto's handsome face made all of the afflicted
thoughts disappear. "And to think this was only the easy part," he remarked with a tiny smile, "Now let's hope my parents feel threatened by me too."

Another hearty chuckle left Makoto's chest and it made Haruka feel infinitely better.

"We truly cannot thank you enough, Prince Haruka," Rei said, breaking the bubble that had naturally formed around them once more. "You helped us so much, I promise we will do anything we can to help you too."

"Anything!" Nagisa emphasised, "Just let us know when we need to go to Iwatobi to talk to your parents and convince them to allow you and Makoto to."

"For now, our main priority is getting my parents to agree to the terms we gave your parents," Haruka interrupted him, like he was scared for Nagisa to finish that thought. "Otherwise we're back to square one and no one wants that. Everything else is secondary, at least for now."

That was enough for Nagisa to get the hint and he closed his mouth, nodding in understanding.

"When are you departing, Prince Haruka?"

Rei's question caught him off-guard. Of course Haruka knew his days here in Sano were limited, but the thought of going back to Iwatobi and possibly leaving his heart behind in this town was harrowing. He stared at his shoes as he calculated how long he could stay here before his parents would send out guards and knights to track him down. After all, he wanted to optimise his time with Makoto, to get to know him better and to figure out what would come after this, but he didn't want to enrage his parents before asking them the biggest favours he ever had.

"Wednesday… evening," Haruka eventually muttered and to his regret, he saw Makoto's cheerful expression falter.

The crestfallen look that struck his beautiful features was gone as quickly as it had come, swept away by the summer breeze, but Haruka recognised the slivers that lingered in his precious eyes as defeat. In a strange way, the knowledge that Makoto felt just as wistful at the notion was comforting.

"Alright, we will make sure to be present at sundown on Thursday," Rei nodded, making a mental note. "Shall we come to Blacksmith Tachibana's?"

"Yes, that's good." If he was going to leave Sano without Makoto, then Haruka wanted to have a fresh imprint of his arms around him, taking in his gorgeous being carefully so he wouldn't forget him for as long as he lived. And if Makoto came with him, then he could say his goodbyes to his family in peace before leaving them for an undetermined period of time.

"Well then," Nagisa said as he leapt up, dusting off his bottom, "I guess it's time for us to leave; we have a wedding to plan!"

"What, already?" Rei cried in surprise as Nagisa threw his arms around his neck, pressing their cheeks together intimately.

"Of course! I'm not going to wait around for my parents to change their minds!"

Makoto laughed when doubt flashed through Rei's framed eyes as Nagisa began to shake him violently in excitement. Yes, this was what he had signed up for and there was no going back now; Nagisa was going to annoy him from the moment he arose to the second he slipped into slumber for the rest of his life. And he was going to love every last minute of it.
"We're going to have a big winter wedding when there's a lot of snow and everything will be covered in lights, and we'll have a big husky sled pull us around the kingdom afterwards!" Nagisa gesticulated wildly around himself as he spoke, like he had planned his entire wedding in his head a long time ago.

"What, a husky sled?! Where are we going to get huskies that are trained to-

"And Haru and Makoto will be our guests of honour!"

Although it was mostly his enthusiasm talking, it brought a small smile to Haruka's lips because he knew Nagisa meant every word. Perhaps things might not go as he hoped them to, but in the very least he would get to see Makoto again at the next royal wedding.

"We'll discuss the details of our wedding later," Rei concluded before Nagisa could claim that he wanted to have a cake with enough tiers to reach the ceiling or something else ridiculous like that, but a smile broke through his serious demeanour too. "Please, do keep an eye out for an invite."

"We will. Good luck," Makoto said, his voice full of amusement at the thought of Nagisa and Rei planning a wedding together. He was sure that unlike the disastrous path to it, the end result would be very beautiful.

Nagisa's mischievous grin proved that Rei had a tough time ahead of himself. "See you!"

When Nagisa ushered Rei away and their backs were turned to them, Makoto was suddenly reminded of something. "Wait!" he yelled as he began to rummage through his bag and took Kisumi's garments out of it. "Please give these back to Kisumi!"

While Makoto went after them, Haruka stood and peered up at Sousuke. "So," he started, calling his guard back to attention, "Isn't there anything you have to go do now?"

"Uh yeah, guarding you."

Sousuke's blunt statement made Haruka roll his eyes. In fear of anyone overhearing, he grabbed the collar of Sousuke's shirt and yanked him down to his own level. "Listen," he hissed under his breath, "I will knight you the instant I become king if you leave us alone whenever I tell you to."

"That's nice and all," Sousuke said, unimpressed, "but I will not be held accountable if something happens to you."

"Nothing will happen to me," Haruka immediately retorted, "but fine. I'll sign a waiver or whatever later. For now, just go away." With that, Haruka released his hold and Sousuke straightened his back, smoothing over his clothing with his palm.

"As you wish, Your Highness."

It sounded ingenuine at best and mocking at worst, but Haruka had no more energy to waste on any further discussion with him. Makoto was approaching them again and the smile that graced his lips instantly made Haruka forget about Sousuke's very existence.

"Sorry about that," Makoto said when he was standing in front of them. "My mom went through the trouble of washing Kisumi's clothes last night so I could send them back with Nagisa today. Thankfully they were dry this morning because of the mellow night, otherwise I might not have had another opportunity to return them to him. But I don't know what I would have done if I forgot to give them in spite of that!"
"You remembered in time, and that's all that matters," Haruka shrugged with a small, blossoming smile.

"Yeah," Makoto agreed, shaking his head to rid them of the what-ifs. "So anyway, now that everything has been taken care of, I was wondering if there was anything you would like to do or see while you're here…?"

"You," Haruka blurted in response, and it wasn't until Makoto tilted his head in confusion that he realised how poorly he had worded that. "I meant your daily life. Just, what you would usually be doing during an afternoon like this one."

"Oh," Makoto muttered in understanding, "Well, it really depends. Nowadays a lot of my time is spent here singing, but you've already seen that and there isn't much to it. Besides, with this kind of weather, I don't think many more folks will gather around to listen to the same couple of songs they've already heard over and over again."

If it weren't for the explanation that singing wasn't likely to earn him much at this particular time, Haruka would have objected to the idea that there wasn't much to watching him perform. He could stay here for hours, listening carefully to every note of every song in his repertoire and being mesmerised by every word.

"On any other day, I'd probably be out running some errands for someone, but I only got shot down today," Makoto continued with a melancholic smile, "Or I'd be helping out my father with the shop, but he already said that he doesn't have enough work for the two of us."

"Oh," Haruka sighed. He tried to conceal the tiny pang of disappointment he felt, but of course Makoto noticed it.

"I could always offer to take over his work for the day," Makoto suggested, wanting to fulfill Haruka's wishes. "It's not like there's any other way for me to earn more today, so I might as well give my father an afternoon off. If he agrees to it, at least…"

Although Haruka truly appreciated the lengths Makoto was willing to go through for him, he didn't want to give him more work to do without any more payment for it. While he did think Makoto's father deserved a break, based off the impression Mr. Tachibana gave him last night, he would never put the burden on his children unless it was absolutely necessary. The chances that he would brush Makoto's offer off and tell him to go have fun instead were very high.

Struck with an idea, Haruka said, "Actually, I would like to commission you to make something for me."

"Oh," Makoto mumbled in surprise. "Uh, alright, of course. What do you want me to make?"

"I…" Haruka hadn't exactly thought about that yet. He had no clue how much time an average project would take, and it wasn't like he had any use for a sword or armour or farming equipment to begin with. "Surprise me."

"Alright," Makoto agreed, seeming like he already had something in mind. "Before that, though, are you hungry?"

"A little."

"Why don't we eat some lunch first, and then I can make you something after?"

When met with such an endearing look, Haruka couldn't have refused his offer even if he wanted
to. "Alright."

A sweet smile stretched Makoto's cheeks and he bent down to gather his stuff. When he picked up his cup, his mouth fell open by the amount he saw inside of it. How it got there, or rather, who had put it there was no conundrum.

"I see you already paid upfront," Makoto remarked, unsure of whether to thank or scold Haruka for his generous donation.

The prince merely turned his head away. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Makoto's smile softened. Knowing that Haruka had no interest or use for these riches that meant the world to his family, he put the cup into his bag without protest. "Thank you, Haru. I really appreciate that."

"Appreciate what?" Haruka questioned, but lying and feigning clearly wasn't his expertise either.

Makoto only giggled as he slung his bag over his shoulder and picked up his guitar. "Shall we go?"

"Yes." Meanwhile, Haruka shot daggers at Sousuke to remind him of their conversation.

"Um, actually," Sousuke started, scratching at his head, "I have something I need to do. Where was that boy's tailor shop again? Rin was his name?"

"It's just around the corner," Makoto said and he pointed in a general direction that meant precisely nothing to Sousuke. "Why?"

"I uh… figured I should go apologise to him for what happened yesterday."

Remembering the dark blush that had spontaneously appeared on Rin's face when he heard Sousuke's voice, Makoto grinned. "I'm sure he'd like that. There's a big sign on the storefront that reads 'Matsuoka's Fitted Garments', so it's hard to miss. But since it's on the way to my house, we'll walk you there."

To that, Sousuke had no objections.

The tailor shop was only a stone's throw away from the town square and they dropped Sousuke off at the front as promised.

"You sure you'll be alright?" Sousuke hesitated. He might not have been too fond of Haruka, but he was quite fond of his job and he wanted to keep it. He wasn't one to disregard his tasks, and apparently he still didn't feel good about it even when he was directly ordered to.

"Of course."

To assure him, Makoto added, "We'll just be at my house, so there's nothing to worry about. My mom is here, actually, so she can walk you back when you're done so you don't get lost."

"Why would I get lost?"

The incredulity in Sousuke's voice left Makoto in bewilderment. Had he already forgotten completely about yesterday's affair? Because he didn't want to spend too much time reminding him of how he wandered off into the crowd only for Kisumi to have to go find him, Makoto simply said, "It's an unfamiliar town."

"I'll manage."
With that, Sousuke turned around and opened the door, the little bell that hung above it chiming to announce his presence, and he was gone.

"See you later," Makoto mumbled back to empty space, but he chuckled at it all the same. His eyes met Haruka's. "I suppose that just leaves us now."

"Yeah," Haruka replied, feeling a rush of nerves and excitement in his veins, "I don't mind that."

Makoto smiled tenderly. "Me neither."

A comfortable silence wrapped around them as they continued on their way to Makoto's house, content with just the other's presence. If the back of Haruka's hand bumped against Makoto's with every other step he took, then that was purely accidental. And if Makoto eventually grasped his fingers and held onto them lightly, then that was just as much of an accident.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed!

Like I mentioned at the start of the chapter, the next chapter is finished and I'm already working on chapter 9. While there are still chapters for other fics that I have to write too, I hope I can take advantage of this head start and update this fic somewhat regularly again. I can't make any promises, but I hope you'll stick around till the end.

In the meanwhile, you can find me on Twitter and Tumblr as DatHeetJoella for more MakoHaru content in between fic updates and more information on my projects and progress. You can also shoot me a message on Curious Cat if you want.

Thank you so much for reading, I hope to see you again at the next chapter, and for now I wish you a lovely day!
Despite no one being there to answer, Makoto called out a soft "I'm home," as he swung open the front door.

He put his guitar down in a corner and slung his bag and hat on the arms of the coat rack. Then he grabbed his tin cup of earnings. All the coins he collected that day were stashed away safely in a drawer of the wardrobe, that stood beside the kitchenette and took up a large portion of the humble family room. When the cup was tucked back into his bag for future use, Makoto went over to the sink to wash his hands and Haruka followed suit.

"Please take a seat wherever you like," he said as he passed on the towel.

Once his hands were dry, Haruka sat down in the same chair he had last night. Meanwhile, Makoto took a small glass out of a cupboard and filled it with water. He removed the dandelion from behind his ear and gently placed it inside, putting the makeshift vase on top of the windowsill. The sunlight that shone through danced on the little petals, and somehow, it made Makoto's house feel even homelier than it did before.

"What do you want to drink? We have milk, tea, perhaps even a bit of coffee-"

"Just some water is fine, thanks," Haruka said, "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No, it's alright! You're a guest." Makoto brought two slightly larger glasses of water to the table, set one down in front of Haruka and the other one across from him. "Let me just go ask if my dad wants anything real quick."

Haruka nodded in understanding and Makoto left through the door that connected the shop to the house. As he waited for Makoto to return, Haruka took a small sip of his water.

The water wasn't as cold as he was used to and tasted slightly different, but in the end, water was water and Haruka could never dislike it. So he downed some more, only now feeling how dry his
throat was. It wasn't odd, considering he talked more this morning than he usually would in a week and hadn't drunk anything since breakfast. Water proved itself once more to be a blessing regardless of its source.

Makoto came back as swiftly as he had gone, and a kind smile lit up his face when their eyes met. "He doesn't want anything," he said as he returned to the kitchen counter. "Now, lunch," he muttered more to himself than to Haruka. "We don't have any more leftovers from last night, so is some bread alright? I don't trust myself to make anything else."

"Of course." Although he was sure that Makoto was more skilled when it came to cooking than he gave himself credit for, he didn't want to come off as demanding by objecting to that. When he recalled how Makoto cut his finger while chopping onions, bread did seem like the safest option.

Two plates were put on the counter and Makoto took eight slices of bread out of the box. "Let's see what we have," he mused as he opened another cupboard. "Oh, we have strawberry jam! I suppose Mrs. Tamura had a good harvest this year. Ren will be so happy about this, it's his favourite- Is strawberry jam okay?"

Haruka smiled at Makoto's stream of thoughts. "If that's alright with Ren."

"Of course it is, he won't mind." Makoto took a knife from a drawer and began to smear some jam onto the slices.

As Haruka watched how his long fingers guided the knife over the bread to spread the strawberry jam evenly, he noticed that the slices on one plate received a far richer layer than the ones on the other.

"Horizontal or diagonal cut?" Makoto asked as he added the top slices to create four sandwiches.

"Doesn't matter," Haruka said, so Makoto opted for a horizontal cut.

Once he finished coating and cutting the bread, he licked off the remnants of jam that lingered on the knife and when he did, Haruka let out a huff of amusement. "What?" he whined in defense, "It's covered in breadcrumbs so I can't smear it back into the jar, but it's a waste to just rinse it off!"

Another smile of endearment tugged at Haruka's lips. Admittedly, he did have a point. "Be careful not to cut your tongue, though."

"This knife is blunt, so I don't think I could cut it even if I tried."

"With you, anything is possible."

"Hey!" Makoto yelped, and Haruka snorted at how insulted he sounded. He was too cute.

Just like he had expected, when Makoto brought the plates over to the table, he put the sandwiches with the thick layer of jam down in front of Haruka.

"Can I have the other plate?"

"Oh," Makoto said in surprise, "but I-"

"I know," Haruka assured, "but you like sweet things more than I do."

"Yeah, but... are you sure?"

"Yes."
Per Haruka's request, Makoto switched their plates around and then he sat down as well. "Sorry I can't offer you something better."

That actually offended Haruka more than the meal in front of him ever could. Makoto did everything within his might to provide for his family day in, day out and still didn't earn much. The last thing he had to feel guilty about was not being able to give something 'better' to him. "Don't say that."

"Sorry, it's just," Makoto sighed, awkwardly rubbing his finger around the rim of his plate, "I wish I could give you something you'd like."

"Who said I don't like this?" To prove the contrary, he sank his teeth into the bread, taking a larger bite than he usually would have and jam clung to the corners of his mouth. It was obvious the bread was a day or two old and it wasn't buttered up, but that didn't make it any less tasty; though he wasn't the biggest fan of strawberry jam, its flavour was decent and not too sweet so that was good too. As long as it was edible, Haruka wouldn't have complained, so this was no disappointment at all. "See, it's really good," he claimed when his mouth was empty, licking the excess jam off his lips.

Makoto laughed at that obvious lie; Haruka knew he had tasted the food he was served on a daily basis, and that was objectively leagues tastier than these somewhat stale sandwiches. Still, he seemed to appreciate Haruka's attempt at reassuring him so he played along, "Better than mackerel?"

"Hmm," Haruka hummed, feigning deep thought, "it's certainly a contender."

Again, Makoto couldn't do anything but laugh.

The amicable ambience that Makoto carried wherever he went surrounded them as they ate their sandwiches. Out of all of the meals they shared, the ones where it was just the two of them felt extra special regardless of what was being served. And as Haruka stared into those gorgeous eyes while Makoto tried to find a balance between eating with his mouth shut and talking, Haruka realised that this was all he ever wanted.

The table wasn't made with a fancy cloth, there was no cutlery besides their hands and the porcelain dishware had been traded in for steel plates that were undoubtedly homemade. Instead of a large flower vase as a centerpiece, there was a tiny dandelion perched up on the windowsill, one of the sole touches of colour in this rustic room. The pristine water drained from the mountain springs in Iwatobi he usually drank was replaced by tap water of an unknown source. Two sandwiches that were composed of slices of brown bread and locally produced strawberry jam on each plate made up the entire meal, as opposed to the endless stream of mackerel and turkey and pies he was used to. And Haruka didn't care about any of it, because Makoto was the one sitting across from him. His presence made any meal the best Haruka could possibly experience.

In his heart, he had long since reached his decision. It was made the second Makoto confessed to his act and apologised and told him his name. His rationale had forced him to wait and see how things would develop, to let Makoto prove his honesty before he allowed himself to take the greatest risk in his life, all to protect himself from getting hurt again. But he knew from the start it was futile, because the moment Makoto's lips touched his, he fell so deeply that attempts to crawl back to where he was before he met him would be in vain.

There was no denying it now; he would give up everything he had if that was what it took to be with Makoto. And if this was destined to end up in a heartbreak, then Haruka wouldn't regret taking the leap. The chances of having their happy ending were slim, but as long as it was within the
realm of possibility, it was worth it.

Once their plates were empty and their hunger was stilled, it was time to get to work.

Haruka offered to clean up since Makoto had prepared their meal, but Makoto declined. They hadn't used much stuff and in order to save water and soap, they wouldn't do the dishes until there was a fair stack of them. Seeing how that did make sense, Haruka would postpone his offer until then.

When the door to blacksmith shop that was adjoint to the house was unlatched, Haruka realised he hadn't actually seen the workplace before.

The area was a bit bigger than the family room, stretching out further where it presumably bordered the bedrooms and bathroom. A large oven stood at the back, casting a flickering light on the two anvils placed in front of it, one for each blacksmith. A long, weathered workbench took up almost half of the shop, the years that passed clearly visible on the discoloured wood. One of the walls was decorated with various tools and equipment that Haruka couldn't even begin to recognise, and another was empty, yet the nails that were embedded in it suggested that the wallspace was previously used. Opposite of the main entrance beside the oven was another smaller door, and Haruka figured that it either led outside or to a possible storage room.

The second they stepped inside, the scent of smoke and metal hit his nose and the heat that came from the oven enveloped him; if it was hot outside, then it was absolutely sweltering in this room. Makoto didn't appear to be bothered by it at all and if he was, then he was great at hiding it.

Mr. Tachibana was seated at the workbench, polishing his latest creation with a cloth. He looked up from his work and smiled when he saw them. "Hello, boys," he called as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with his arm.

From the neck down, Mr. Tachibana was a stereotypical blacksmith: broad shoulders that looked even wider thanks to the leather apron that was tied around his neck, strong arms fit to work with clamps and hammers, large hands with a tight grip that nothing could slip out of. But from the neck up, with his inviting smile and crooked spectacles, he looked more like a friendly librarian. Which was ironic, considering his illiteracy. It was easy to tell Makoto inherited his build from his father, while the kind faces seemed to run in both sides of the family.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Tachibana," Haruka uttered with a bow, the nerves he felt when he first met him resurfacing in their entirety.

"Hi again," Makoto said and he grabbed his own apron from a peg on the wall, "Haru wanted to see how we work so I'm going to make something for him. Is that alright?"

"Of course!" Mr. Tachibana said and his warm smile never wavered, like it was permanently etched into his face. He got up from his stool and untied his apron. "I was just about to go bring these sickles to Mr. Isurugi." He held up two sickles, one slightly larger than the other, to show them to his son and Haruka.

"I thought he was coming to pick them up tomorrow?"

"He was, but I finished them early and I don't have anything else to work on right now, so I figured I'd spare him the trouble of coming here and drop them off instead." With the sickles in hand, Mr.
Tachibana hung his apron on another peg and gave Makoto an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Business isn't just about getting new customers, it's mainly about ensuring the customers you have stay happy and loyal."

He shot Makoto a wink so subtle that Haruka could clearly see it too, and the blush that lit up Makoto's ears at the gesture didn't go unnoticed either.

"Feel free to use anything you'd like," Mr. Tachibana said as he walked towards the entrance.

Flustered by his father's knowing grin, Makoto stammered, "Thanks, Dad."

"Thank you, sir," Haruka replied and he bid Mr. Tachibana's back another bow.

"Then I'll leave the shop to you, boys," Makoto's father said, waving at them over his shoulder and then he opened the door, "Tell your mother when she gets home that I'll be back before dinner."

"I will. Have a safe trip!"

With that, the door clicked shut and Makoto and Haruka were alone once more.

Although he hadn't meant to chase Makoto's father away from his shop, Haruka would be lying if he said he wasn't relieved that it was just the two of them. Mr. Tachibana was an incredibly nice and welcoming man, but Haruka's desire to leave a good impression on Makoto's parents resulted in him still walking on eggshells when they were around. Being alone with Makoto made him feel a lot more comfortable for obvious reasons.

"In the meanwhile, have you decided on what it is that you want, or do you still want me to pick?" Makoto asked as he hooped his leather apron over his head and fastened it at the small of his back.

"You can pick," Haruka said, curious to see what Makoto would come up with.

A smile brightened Makoto's features and he made his way to the mysterious door. "Any preferred material?"

Haruka frowned. "What choices do I have?"

"Let's see," Makoto mumbled and he unveiled the storage room, that was more like a storage closet. "We have iron, steel, copper... and hey, even a bit of gold!"

"Copper and gold?" Haruka asked in confusion. "I thought you were a blacksmith."

"I am! We are," Makoto corrected, "We mainly work with iron and steel."

"Why do you have copper and gold then?"

"Well, it's because my grandfather, the first Blacksmith Tachibana, actually planned to become a redsmith at first."

"Oh?" Haruka pulled out Mr. Tachibana's stool and sat down. He put his elbow on the workbench and rested his cheek on his knuckles. "I'd love to hear the story behind that."

Makoto let out a chuckle and leaned against the doorframe. "My grandfather originally comes from a family of luthiers. His father, so my great-grandfather, had a shop where he made string instruments like violins and cellos and guitars. He's the one who made the guitar that I have," he mentioned as a side note. "My grandfather was the third child, and because his older sisters were going to take the shop over from their father, my grandfather decided he wanted to do something..."
It's no use opening a bakery when there's already a bakery up and running that everyone is familiar with, because folks won't switch over to your shop and abandon the baker that they know and love. It's a tight-knit community and the people are loyal to each other," Makoto explained, "My grandfather eventually wanted to open his own shop, so he decided that he wanted to bring something to the village that they didn't already have. He asked around and heard there was a redsmith in this town who was offering apprenticeships, so he decided that was what he wanted to do. So he gathered up his things and left his village with the plan to return as a fully-fledged redsmith."

"But then something happened," Haruka predicted with a soft smile.

"Then he met my grandmother," Makoto continued, mirroring Haruka's expression. "From what I've been told, he fell in love with her the second he saw her. She loved him too, but she refused to move to my grandfather's remote village that was too far away from her family and friends. His apprenticeship was still running, so he had to make a choice."

"Either he goes back to his village as a redsmith by himself, or he comes to live in this town to be with your grandmother," Haruka finished.

There was something about the situation that reminded him of their own circumstances. What Makoto's grandfather had done was obvious, for Makoto would not be standing here to tell this tale if the man had returned to his village alone. If it was up to him, he'd definitely make the same decision, but whether or not Makoto would choose this path too was yet to be determined.

"He really loved my grandmother, and it wasn't like being a redsmith had been his lifelong dream to begin with, so he put a stop to his apprenticeship. Now he needed to look for another job and because he couldn't just stay here for the rest of his life without letting his family back in the village know what happened, he decided to take up an apprenticeship at his village's blacksmith instead. Then he could learn a new craft that wouldn't completely disregard what he learned so far and that he could utilise at this town, since this town was a lot smaller back then and didn't have a blacksmith for ordinary folks yet, only for the rich and noble. So my grandmother agreed to come with him for his apprenticeship as long as they came back here once it was over. And well," Makoto trailed off, gesturing around himself, "Blacksmith Tachibana was born. He still had a lot of basic knowledge from his time spent at the redsmith's, so that information was naturally passed down to my father, and then to me."

"That's really interesting," Haruka said, glad to have been given this piece of Makoto's family history. "What happened to the redsmith, though?" he wondered, for he hadn't seen a redsmith's shop anywhere during their strolls around town.

"They went out of business about twenty-five years ago," Makoto said with a somber sigh, "the redsmith was old and didn't have a successor, so when working became impossible for him, the shop just disappeared."

"Oh, that's unfortunate."

"It's sad, but it's the sad truth for many folks. Some people who are still able to work and have successors are forced to close their shops too because they don't make enough profit to keep things up. There's nothing we can do about it, not for now at least."
The thought of the shop Makoto's ancestors worked so hard to build and establish going out of business like that was heart-wrenching. Especially after hearing his story, Haruka felt the need to protect these decade-old walls, this trademark that had been nourished by Makoto, his father and his father before him. He might not have a say in what happened here in Sano, but Haruka knew he would do anything to keep Makoto and all that was precious to him safe and sound.

Not wanting to linger on a depressing note, Makoto perked himself up and said, "The gold's a different story though."

Any story that left Makoto's lips was an interesting one in Haruka's book. "Enlighten me," Haruka urged, the corners of his mouth curling up at the sight of Makoto's smile.

"My father is the one who introduced gold to our shop," Makoto started, taking a moment to think about the order of events. "Have you noticed that my mother wears her wedding ring on her middle finger?"

"I can't say that I have," Haruka said. If he had, he probably would have assumed this was customary in Sano.

Rather than revealing the answer as to why she did, Makoto continued on a different note, "My parents met when they were teenagers; one day my mother walked into this shop with her father while my father was at work. He was forging by that anvil, and when he looked up, he saw her standing near the doorway. She was the prettiest girl in the entire town - according to him - and the instant he saw her, he fell in love. So much so that he couldn't take his eyes off her and promptly slammed his hammer down onto his thumb."

"Ouch," Haruka chuckled at the mental image. Clumsiness apparently ran in his father's bloodline.

"Needless to say, it was love at first sight for her too," Makoto giggled along. "From that point on, they saw each other more and more often and became the best of friends, but neither dared to make the first move. My mother was rather popular and had lots of suitors waiting in line for her hand, men and women alike, and my father was afraid that he was inadequate compared to all the others. He wasn't very wealthy and could never offer her the things that others could. Wanting the best for her, he kept quiet about his feelings and hoped they would go away eventually."

"But they didn't," Haruka said with an odd sense of relief.

"They never did," Makoto affirmed, a fond smile gracing his lips. "My mother kept rejecting every courtship and declaration of affection that was sent her way, and when she turned down a particularly wealthy merchant's son, my father asked her why. She just stared at him for a solid minute before she told him to take the hint already and then she kissed him. That was the official start of their relationship, and things moved along pretty quickly from that point. I think my father was afraid she'd change her mind."

Haruka laughed at that, reminded of Nagisa and Rei. He supposed he would do the same if he were in the situation of Makoto's parents or their friends. When love was pure and true, there was no reason to postpone the inevitable.

"My father wanted to give her something special and meaningful, but he couldn't afford an engagement ring or anything fancy like that. The feelings of inadequacy returned, but this time, he wouldn't let himself get discouraged; my mother's love fueled a fire inside of him that couldn't be tamed. So instead of buying her an engagement ring, he set his mind to making one for her himself. He begged the local goldsmith to give him a brief apprenticeship and after a lot of persistence, the goldsmith agreed to teach him the basics provided that he pay for all the gold he used. However, he
would only teach him for three days, and that was it."

"Three days?" Haruka questioned, quirking his eyebrow in disbelief, "That's unreasonable. Who could learn the basics of a craft in only three days?"

"It sounds impossible, right?" Makoto said with a smile, "But my father was desperate so he agreed. He kept it a secret from everyone but my grandfather, who he had to ask for permission to leave work for three days. The days flew by but he was eager to learn, and though it was certainly a challenge, by the end of the third day, my father thanked the goldsmith for all he had taught him and returned home. Here, he made the engagement ring in secrecy, and he was so excited about it that he forgot to pay attention to the size," Makoto snorted, "It was the first real thing he made on his own out of gold, so it ended up being too big and a bit askew, but my mother loved it. Throughout the years, my father has offered multiple times to make her a new one or at the very least adjust it to fit her ring finger, but she always declines. Its imperfections are what makes it perfect to her."

That made Haruka's heart flutter, for he understood her completely. "That's very sweet."

Makoto's droopy eyes crinkled in fondness as he tilted his head in that adorable habit. "He returned to blacksmithing after that, but soon word spread around town about the ring he made for my mother. The usual clientele came in with requests for rings and jewellery too; they had never been able to afford wedding rings and the likes before, but they knew that our prices were decent and figured it was worth to ask. Just because folks are poor doesn't mean they don't want to have something nice for special occasions like that, you know?"

There was no need for Makoto to justify it. Haruka could imagine there was little joy in living if one only focused on the necessities to survive, and he thought everyone deserved to have some luxury in whatever form regardless of their socio-economic standing.

"My father hadn't expected for there to be any interest so he hadn't considered making more beyond that, but after getting so many requests, he couldn't refuse," Makoto continued, "So he began to hone his goldsmithing skills. Working with a precious metal like gold is very different from working with regular metal, so the results aren't as substantial as jewellery made by an actual goldsmith. But the people are happy with it, and that's all that matters."

It was a heartwarming tale, but something didn't quite add up. "Isn't the material very expensive, though?" Haruka asked, "Does he undersell his craft to make it more affordable for your patrons?"

"Gold isn't that expensive," Makoto said nonchalantly, but when he realised how odd that sounded coming from him, he clarified, "It's definitely not cheap, but he uses gold of a low karat and makes sure to purchase it from the miners directly. It obviously still costs more than iron or copper, but the raw material is nowhere near as much as a finished piece from a professional goldsmith; they normally use gold between 14 and 24 karat, whereas my father only uses up to 8 karat, which is a lot less pure and therefore less expensive."

"I see…" Haruka mumbled. It was funny how someone as poor as Makoto was teaching someone like him about the different types of gold and their worth, but unlike many other princes, Haruka had no interest in gold and never bothered looking into it.

"It's not like the jewellery my father sells is cheap either, but he tries his best to keep his profits to a minimum so his prices are as affordable as possible for our customers."

"That's kind of him, but you need the profit to live off of, right?"
"We do, so it's all about finding that balance." He made a gesture with his hands that mimicked a scale. "He charges just enough to cover the material cost and the time he spent working on it, as opposed to actual goldsmiths who usually ask that in tenfold, if not more. But their work is also leagues fancier and they work hard to tend to their craft, so I guess it's worth its price to those who can afford it and wish to have it."

To people like him. Haruka had seen the gold brooches and candelabras and other paraphernalia members of royalty would use to show off their wealth, and his family was no exception. Their bragging was oftentimes so subtle it nearly seemed desperate. Haruka didn't care for those charades. "It's just a symbol of status. Anything would do as long as it costs a fortune."

Kindhearted as he was, Makoto tried to view it in a more positive light. "There must be a lot of pressure to uphold the status-quo."

"That's not it." Haruka shook his head. "It's envy, greed. It's not so much that they want everything that others have, but more so that they want what they have to be the fanciest: if there's a set of silverware embedded with diamonds at one banquet, then all the appetizers and drinks will be served on platinum platters at the next masquerade," Haruka scoffed, scrunching up his nose in disdain. "It's nothing more than an act for people to boast about how much better they are than others."

"Even if the reason behind purchasing those things is ingenuine, I suppose they still serve their purpose," Makoto said with a gentle smile and a slight shrug. "When it comes down to it, things are only worth as much as we believe them to be. It's not like gold and silver coins are made out of actual gold and silver to begin with, we just collectively decided their worth and that's what makes them valuable. I assume it's the same when it comes to the things desired by noblemen."

Haruka nodded in concurrence. All rarity aside, if no one wanted to have gold or comparable precious objects in the first place then few would bat an eye at it. Subsequently, if a queen appointed horse dung as the new craze then everyone would hoard it and claim the fragrance was uniquely wonderful. For the most educated rank in the hierarchy, they were a herd of mindless, pretentious sheep. "It's downright ridiculous."

Makoto chuckled at the bitter undertone in Haruka's voice. "I can imagine. That mindset doesn't just impact folks in your circles; ordinary folks are influenced by what they see and hear from the rich too, so it's not strange that they feel a sense of longing for the luxuries they can't have. When they hear about my father's dabbling in goldsmithing, they feel like those luxuries might just be within reach. They save up for a long time before they're able to afford something like a ring or a bracelet, but I suppose it's worth it."

When faced with things like that, Haruka couldn't help but feel a bit guilty. He had all the riches in the world and didn't appreciate it, while there were others who dreamed to have even an ounce of the resources he had. Despite being born at the epitome of wealth, he wasn't materialistic at all and though Makoto grew up in unimaginable poverty, he didn't seem to seek prosperity as much as he sought out stability. In the end, everyone strived to have what was outside their reach, be it a silver necklace, a life without worries, or freedom.

"Have you ever made something out of gold?" Haruka then asked. Unlike when he was talking about the shop before, Makoto had only mentioned his father in this case.

"I haven't," Makoto confirmed his suspicions, "We haven't had many requests for them lately, and even if we did, then my father would be the one to make them because that's more efficient. I've had plenty of time, but I'm not at liberty to waste costly materials on experiments like that."
That did make sense. The last thing to spend money on was gold for practice when there were days they struggled to even put food on the table.

"So I was thinking that this might be a nice occasion to try?" Makoto suggested, sounding a bit unsure of himself but nonetheless excited.

"Is that okay? I mean, like you said, gold is more expensive than iron so…"

"You're a paying customer, aren't you?" Makoto beamed, "My father said we can use anything we'd like so I don't think he'd have any objections. Unless you don't want me to. I know you wanted to see me work as a blacksmith and this is different-"

"I want it!" Haruka blurted before Makoto could go off on a tangent. "I… think it would be very nice."

Makoto smiled at his undisguisable enthusiasm. "How about this: I'll try to make something out of gold and if I screw up beyond repair, I'll make you something out of iron later to make up for it."

Haruka bit his bottom lip to suppress a smile of his own. "Sounds like a plan."

Makoto ventured into the storage closet, retrieving a little gold nugget from its depths.

"Do you always have it in stock?" Unless they used it on the regular, it didn't sound wise to purchase it upfront when they didn't know when they were going to use it again. That wasn't even taking into consideration the risk of keeping something so valuable in their home in times of crisis.

"No, my father normally only buys it when he has a project to work on," Makoto said as he took the gold up to Haruka so he could see the raw material. "When he first got started and had a ton of demand for it, he bought it in bulk because that was cheaper, but nowadays he's rarely asked about it. We still had some left over because someone had to cancel their order some time ago."

"Oh… that's not good," Haruka stumbled in lack of a better response.

"It was quite a dent in our budget at the time, but it couldn't be helped. People don't usually cancel their order unless they absolutely have to. Fortunately, my father hadn't started to work on it yet so the material wasn't ruined. My mother told him that he should try to sell it back to the miner, but he was sure that it would be alright, that he would need it sooner or later anyway," Makoto recalled with an amused puff, "And now it can finally be put to use."

A smile graced Haruka's face, glad that he could help out in this way. Whatever the original patron would have paid, he'd pay at least double. Anything Makoto made was more valuable to him than all the stars in the sky.

With that Makoto got to work; he'd seen his father create things out of gold a dozen times, so even if he had never made anything himself prior to this, he wasn't clueless. As he forged the precious metal, he narrated what he was doing and why the steps he took were necessary in the whole process and, where applicable, how it differed from working with other metals.

Upon his insistence, Haruka watched Makoto's skillful hands melt and mold the material from a safe distance, but he made sure to follow each movement of his arm and every flick of his wrist.

On top of experiencing a part of Makoto's life like he desired, Haruka found that he actually learned a lot about the things he normally saw as finished pieces, yet that were works that had gone through many different stages, guided on their path from material to item by craftsmen like Makoto and his father. It was very fascinating, and watching him made his hands itch to try it out for
himself. That was not what he came here to do, so for today, he would restrain himself and hope that there would be an opportunity in the future when Makoto could teach him for real.

The afternoon passed them by like it always seemed to do when they were together, boundless chattering filling up the minutes. What Makoto was making was no longer a surprise, as the gold was molded in an unmistakable form, but that didn't make Haruka any less elated. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so thrilled by the prospect of receiving a gift, but he knew that it was because Makoto was the one making it especially for him. He would always cherish anything Makoto gave him, yet this was extra special and he could hardly wait until he was done. Until then, he would enjoy watching his delicate hands craft it to completion.

When the item was finally done and had cooled off, Makoto took a brief moment to polish it. Once satisfied with the result, he crouched down in front of Haruka, the item concealed from sight in his large palms.

He gently took Haruka's hand in his and slipped the gold ring onto his finger. "It fits, I'm glad," he murmured, and he pressed a small but soft kiss to the back of Haruka's hand. Then he looked up at him with joy glittering in his gorgeous eyes.

Haruka's mouth fell open, abashed by the gesture, and he lifted his hand to study the ring more closely. The simple band was crooked and had slight indentations and it was the most beautiful piece of jewellery he had ever seen. It astonished him and his heart pounded fiercely against his ribs for even if he had seen Makoto make it, having it wrapped around his finger was something else. It rendered him speechless and there was nothing he could do but gape like a freshly caught mackerel.

"Sorry, it must be weird after all, huh? Making a ring for you, especially after everything I told you," Makoto said dejectedly and he got up, interpreting Haruka's silence as dislike. "It's just… I wanted to give you something that you could always carry around wherever you went, something that is suitable for a prince but also reminded you of me. I guess I overstepped a boundary here, so I apologise."

"No!" Haruka shouted, surprising them both with the loudness of his voice. He opened and closed his mouth rapidly, searched every part of his brain to express what he truly felt but the words were escaping him.

The ring was stunning and meant the world to Haruka, so Makoto didn't need to feel insecure. There was no way he could ever be offended by something he worked so hard on, something so pure and genuine - if he had been, then he would have told him that the moment he saw the mold, before he went through the trouble of finishing it. Truly, he felt honoured that Makoto made him something so personal, that he would be allowed to wear it. He would make sure to cherish it for the rest of his days.

"It's beautiful," Haruka mumbled after a second of hesitation, eyes pointed at his feet on the stone floor. "I love it."

Makoto shut his mouth before bidding him a shy smile. "Thank you. I'm sure it's not nearly as nice as all the other rings you have but-"

"Stop," Haruka cut him off, not wanting to hear any more of his self-deprecation. Suddenly, the words poured out of him. "It's absolutely beautiful. You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you for making this, Makoto."

Hit by a wave of courage, Haruka got up. He put his hands on Makoto's shoulders, stood on the tips
of his toes, and pressed a light kiss to his cheek.

He meant to pull away afterwards, but he couldn't; their hearts were magnets drawn to each other and could only be separated by sheer force. Instead, he gave in. Slowly his arms wrapped around Makoto's neck, reducing the distance between their bodies, and he looked up at him.

Makoto's breath hitched when Haruka's nose brushed over his. Unable to resist the spell Haruka always seemed to put him under, his arms found their place at his waist and pulled him against himself. Then, he leaned his forehead to Haruka's.

The seconds ticked by as their gazes met and Makoto's warm, strawberry-scented breath tingled against Haruka's skin. Blood rushed through their veins as their hearts nearly beat out of their chests with anticipation and yearning, but held back by uncertainty.

The affirmation they needed was vibrant in the other's eyes like it had been a couple of nights ago. In this case, too, there was no reason to postpone the inevitable.

They followed their gut and leaned closer, only a whisper away from the kiss they had been craving ever since their lips first parted.

"Dear, can you hand me the-"

Makoto's mother burst into the room and startled them from their trance. Her appearance was like a rainstorm on a cloudless summer's day, unexpected and abrupt. Haruka and Makoto jumped away from each other immediately, before their lips could touch.

"Mom!" Makoto yelped, blushing all the way up to his ears at the scene his mother unintentionally yet so crudely interrupted.

"Makoto, Haruka!" Mrs. Tachibana gasped, just as surprised as her son and his prince. Although they broke apart the instant they heard her voice, it was obvious she had seen what they were doing - or rather, what they were about to do. Kind as ever, she tried to hide it with an awkward smile and asked, "Makoto, where's your father?"

"Um." Makoto cleared his throat. "He, uh, went to deliver the sickles he made to Mr. Isurugi. He said that he'd be back before dinner."

"He better hurry then because dinner is almost ready," she said, and it wasn't until then that Haruka noticed how much time had passed since he arrived at Makoto's house; from what he could see through the windows, the sky's blue had turned to a warm orange hue. "I'm assuming you and Sousuke are staying for dinner, aren't you?"

"If it's not too much trouble?" Haruka replied when he realised she was talking to him.

"Of course it isn't! You're always welcome here." A kind smile curled her lips and her eyes fell shut as she tilted her head in the same way her son did. "Makoto, can you bring two of the stools inside when you're done?"

"Sure," Makoto muttered with a stiff grin, "I'll clean up here first and then we'll come inside."

"Thank you." That was all she said before she disappeared through the door again as quickly as she had entered.

Now they were alone once more, the moment was gone. All the tension that hung in the air before the interruption vanished to make place for a bashful silence. An odd sense of déjà vu washed over
Haruka and in his mind, he travelled back to Iwatobi, or more specifically to the palace's ballroom. It was almost like the universe purposely tried to keep them apart, but Haruka would continue to fight back.

In a need to whisk away the tense atmosphere that didn't belong anywhere near them, Haruka cleared his throat and asked, "What do I owe you?"

That snapped Makoto out of his embarrassment, but it made his eyebrows furrow. "What do you mean?"

"For the ring," Haruka explained as he held up his hand and shook it for emphasis.

"Oh, nothing."

"Nothing?" he questioned sceptically.

"You've already paid upfront."

"No, I didn't," he said with a frown of his own. He reached inside his jacket for is wallet. "That has nothing to do with this, that was for your singing."

"It's fine-"

"It's not," he insisted as he opened the pouch to grab a handful of coins, but then Makoto put his hand over his and pushed it to Haruka's chest.

"Haru, please," Makoto urged, and the steadfast tone made Haruka look up at him. His gemlike eyes were shimmering with conviction, unwavering. "It's not much, but this might be the only thing I'll ever be able to give you. Please accept it."

When confronted with such a heartfelt yet bittersweet reason, Haruka couldn't refuse. "Alright," he said and he stuffed his wallet back into his inner pocket - for now; he had seen which drawer Makoto deposited his earnings in. He happened to have some coins that longed to be reunited with the ones he tossed into the tin cup earlier. "Thank you. I truly appreciate it."

To show his gratitude, he leaned in to give Makoto another hug. He allowed himself to bury his face into Makoto's shoulder for just a second, inhaling his foreign yet familiar smell.

"I'm glad you like it," Makoto whispered with a smile he couldn't see, but that he felt within his every fiber.

Though he wished he could, Haruka didn't dare to let their embrace linger this time. Makoto's family and Sousuke were in the next room over, waiting for them to bring the stools so they could have dinner. There was a time and a place for everything, but alas this was not it.

With regret in his heart Haruka pulled back, comforted by the knowledge that the right time and place were just around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed!
I really hope I can continue the trend of posting on a character's birthday, therefore the next chapter should be out on Makoto's birthday. I know that may seem like a long wait when I've already started the next chapter, but it's an important one so I really want to take my time with it rather than rushing. I hope you understand and you'll stick around for the rest of this fic!

In the meanwhile, you can find me on Twitter, Tumblr and Curious Cat @DatHeetJoella for more MakoHaru stuff and snippets of my writing, among other things.

Thank you again for reading and I wish you a lovely day! ^^
Chapter Summary

The end of Haruka's visit to Sano was approaching rapidly, and the time had come to make a big decision. Will Makoto go back to Iwatobi with Haruka, or will he stay in Sano?

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday to Makoto! I'm happy that it's this particular chapter that is coming out on his birthday, because it only feels right that way; this chapter is one that I've been looking forward to writing for actual years now, and I'm so glad to finally be able to share it with you.

Therefore, I really hope you'll enjoy it! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Early on Tuesday morning, Haruka embarked on a quest.

With Sousuke trailing closely behind him, he strode through the main street, mind set to his destination. Cooing pigeons made up the majority of the passersby, but the town was steadily waking up. The shop signs were flipped to open and the first patrons trickled in to purchase a fresh loaf of bread or to place their order at the shoemaker.

It wouldn't be long until the streets would become lively and bustling; though it hadn't even been a week since his arrival, Haruka slowly started to familiarise himself with the town's rhythm. Yesterday he had experienced firsthand what an average weekday was like, and it was a fair midpoint between the crowded markets on Saturdays and the mellow slumps of Sundays.

As promised the day prior, Makoto had taken him along while he ran his errands to give him an idea as to what his regular routine was like. His guard and he were invited over for breakfast at the Tachibana household and afterwards, Haruka got a tour of the tiny bedroom Makoto shared with his siblings.

There, Makoto gave him a pair of his old garments he had outgrown but that they were saving for his little brother; if Haruka was going to wander through town in search for some chores with him, he needed to look the part. Makoto said it was to keep his nice clothes clean and unblemished, but Haruka knew it was mostly to help him blend in with the townsfolk. Because he made it clear from the start Sousuke would not be joining them, Makoto didn't want him to stand out for his own safety. Haruka had no objections to this and gladly changed into the chosen outfit.

Though it had been years since Makoto last wore them, the garbs were too large for Haruka. The sleeves and pant-legs had to be rolled up and his waist was cinched with a belt to keep everything together, but the shirt and trousers were comfortable nonetheless. As opposed to the constricting layers of his nifty suits, Makoto's clothing felt more like sleep attire, light and airy. Breathable.
When he saw himself in the mirror, he gasped softly, overcome with a sense of relief. For the first time in his life, he looked ordinary. Like people wouldn't have their prejudices at the mere sight of him, but instead everyone got to know him for who he truly was. Like he could be part of a community not because he happened to be born in high-society, but because its members liked him for him. Like he was just another face in the crowd. In an odd way, that felt liberating.

The fact that these garbs used to belong to Makoto and were worn by him until they didn't fit anymore was a nice bonus, too.

Once they had dumped Sousuke at Matsuoka's Fitted Garments, their workday started. They helped the merchant of the travelling mercantile load up his coach for his trip to a nearby town, went to fetch groceries for several elders all around the neighbourhood, and plucked cherries at Mrs. Tamura's garden right outside of town.

At first, Makoto was convinced he should do the work alone, because these tasks were 'not suited for a prince'. Haruka had blown that off rather quickly, for it was downright ridiculous. There were no such things as tasks not suited for princes, and he couldn't just stand and watch while Makoto did all the hard work. Even if he was not used to it, even if there were things he hadn't done before, he would do his best and make sure not to slow Makoto down.

It was common knowledge that manual labour was tough and he hadn't thought he underestimated the effort and strength it required. But as the day progressed, he found it was vastly different from what he expected.

The blinding sunshine was merciless as it burned on his skin and in combination with his muscles being tested on their power and endurance, Haruka couldn't recall a time he had perspired more. He'd always considered himself to be fairly fit and athletic, but as he struggled to lift boxes Makoto carried with ease, he realised how wrong he had been.

Lunch was like a gift straight from the heavens, and not because of the strawberry jam sandwiches Mrs. Tachibana packed for them. It was dreadful to know they were only halfway done, and though he usually had to push himself through the day too, this was something else.

At the end of a normal day, his head would be aching because of the information that was pumped into it, but his mind was pretty much the sole part of him that wasn't worn out then. Studying things he didn't care about for hours upon hours and being corrected at his every misstep was draining mentally, but being on his feet all day while hoisting around heavy crates was physically exhausting. He didn't think he'd be able to keep work like this up for an extensive period of time, that he'd ever get adjusted to going through this day in, day out without recess.

Experiencing what it was like to do things he normally didn't think twice about and that would otherwise be done for him changed his perspective immensely. He valued every contribution to society equivalently, but his respect for people like Makoto who worked harder than most for little reward grew substantially. No one should be living like this, and Haruka vowed to himself and to his kingdom that he would do everything within his might to restore the balance once he reigned.

Though Makoto kept saying he didn't mind it, Haruka hoped things would turn around for him soon in whatever way he needed. After working round-the-clock for so many years, he deserved to get some rest - and perhaps, that rest would come sooner than anticipated. If it were up to Haruka, this would have been one of the last days of manual labour of his life.

Makoto's everlasting smile was what fueled him to go on. Had it not been for his company and his radiant energy, then he would've collapsed before the sun was at its peak. Every odd job Makoto arranged for them was horrible in its own way, but when they returned to his house for dinner,
Haruka could honestly say he had enjoyed himself. It showed him Makoto could guide him through any hardship, that he'd be able to conquer it all as long as he had him.

What Haruka hadn't been able to blow off quickly was Makoto's insistence to split his earnings. They had both worked hard and Haruka relieved his burden quite a bit, resulting in him being done much sooner than usual. That warranted an equal amount of pay, Makoto argued. Haruka didn't even bother to explain why he declined.

Makoto's endless kindness and generosity couldn't be described as anything but foolish, but it was one of the countless reasons Haruka adored him so.

When they parted at dusk, Makoto asked if he would join him on his errands the next day too. Alas, Haruka had no other choice but to reject that offer. There was nothing he wanted more than to spend all the time in the world with Makoto, but to prolong that time as much as possible, there were some measures he had to take.

And that was what brought him to Blacksmith Tachibana's today.

"Wait here," he told Sousuke, who shrugged and leaned against the front of the shop with crossed arms. His guard had no interest in his escapades and didn't try to mask his indifference either. Sousuke proved over and over that Haruka made the right choice in bringing him, because he wouldn't want to have it any other way.

To summon courage from every fiber of his being, Haruka closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He balled up his hands, waited one, two seconds, and knocked on the large oak door. Unable to will the nerves away, he threw himself into the deep end and walked inside.

Unlike the first time he entered this shop, smoke didn't immediately assault his windpipe and the air felt pleasantly warm rather than sweltering; the flames that licked out of the oven were doused, reduced to nothing more than remnants of coal and ash. The scent of fire was present like it always was, but the room was illuminated solely by the sunlight that poured in through the windows. Some of the tools that hung on the wall had been removed, their vague silhouettes left behind on the discoloured wooden panels.

As expected, Mr. Tachibana stood at his workbench. With a thick, worn rag, he polished a pair of clamps to banish the rust before it could settle. His head whipped up when he heard Haruka come in and his eyebrows were raised comically above his frameless spectacles.

"Good morning, Mr. Tachibana," Haruka greeted with a bow, heartbeat spiking at the sight of him.

"Good morning, Haruka," he replied, confused but welcoming. "Makoto's not here, I believe he went out on an errand for the Kuramotos. If you-"

"I know," Haruka blurted and he bit his bottom lip. He hadn't meant to interrupt so crudely, but with every word Mr. Tachibana spoke, he got more and more anxious. His nails imprinted his sweaty palms as he forced himself to stay collected. "I'm not here for Makoto. I'm here for you."

That took Mr. Tachibana by surprise and he tilted his head in question. "Oh?"

"I wanted to have a talk with you, if that's alright?"

"Of course. Take a seat." He gestured to the stool under the other side of the bench. "Do you mind if I continue this in the meanwhile?"

"No no, please do continue." Haruka sat where he was told to and stared at his lap, fiddling with
his thumbs. On the way here his determination flourished, but now the moment had finally arrived, it crumbled.

Like his gentle son, Mr. Tachibana was not a scary man at all, yet it was his role as Makoto's father that intimidated Haruka. He was more frightened for this conversation than the one with King and Queen Hazuki, and perhaps even more than for the upcoming negotiations with his parents. It was illogical, but he couldn't help the jittery feeling in his stomach.

An encouraging smile appeared on Mr. Tachibana's face; he probably noticed Haruka's turmoil and wanted to comfort him. His eyes differed from Makoto's, but they shone with the same kindness. "So, Haruka, what did you want to talk with me about?"

"I..." Haruka hesitated. He had to cut to the chase right away, rip the plaster off in one go rather than extending the torture. With another deep breath, he clenched his fists, looked Mr. Tachibana right in the eyes and said, "I want to ask you for Makoto's hand."

His voice nearly echoed throughout the quiet shop and Mr. Tachibana promptly ceased rubbing his clamps, the rag slipping through his calloused fingers.

Haruka's heart pounded against his ribcage like a hammer striking a heated blade as he waited for Mr. Tachibana's response. The butterflies eating away at him from within became fiercer with every agonising second and his determination from before had long since left the building. He knew from the start that it was an unreasonable request of a man he met no more than four days prior, but if he hadn't asked it, he would regret it for the rest of his life. So he could only wait and hope that Makoto's father would recognise his sincerity.

After a short pause that felt like an eon, Mr. Tachibana's lips twitched up in what could only be interpreted as a mischievous grin.

"Just his hand? I figured you would at least want to have his face, too."

Haruka's jaw dropped and his eyes widened in bewilderment. For a second he questioned whether the language spoken in Sano differed from Iwatobi's, because there was no way he heard that correctly.

He had carefully calculated all the possible things Mr. Tachibana could say and crafted his answers accordingly; from thanking him profusely to the arguments he would use to convince him of the purity of his feelings for his son. This, however, was nowhere to be found in his predictions and he had no reaction prepared for this.

"No, I- I meant-"

Loud, boisterous laughter erupted from Mr. Tachibana's chest at Haruka's awkward stuttering. This baffled him even more. His brows furrowed as he watched how Mr. Tachibana's torso shook, unsure whether this response was good or bad news.

"I'm only joking, son," he clarified when his giggles gradually died out. His fatherly smile returned, though it was laced with mirth, "I know what you meant."

A deep sigh left Haruka's lips. It wasn't until then that he realised that Mr. Tachibana's strange comment made all his nerves vanish and his confusion transformed into appreciation. He regained his composure and his confidence flooded back to him. "What do you think, sir?"

"I think," Mr. Tachibana started, all the teasing having left his tone to make place for solemnity, "that I'm not the person you should be asking that."
"Oh." That caught Haruka off guard. In Iwatobi, it was customary to ask the father of your beloved for permission to marry them. It was foolish of him to assume it was the same in Sano. "Should I ask his mother instead?"

Mr. Tachibana smiled and emphasised, "You should ask him."

"Of course, I'm going to," Haruka said, "I just wanted to know if I had your blessing."

"That depends." Mr. Tachibana leaned his palms on the tarnished table, the clamps he was cleaning cast aside and abandoned. "If he says yes, then you do; if he says no, then you don't. It's his decision, and I will stand by him no matter what he chooses."

That was not the answer Haruka had hoped for, but it was one he respected nonetheless. "Are you not concerned, though?" he asked, unable to retain his own doubts, "I know it's only been a week since we met, and the circumstances aren't exactly in our favour…"

"Are you trying to convince me to oppose to your relationship and revoke my blessing?" Mr. Tachibana said with a chuckle.

"No, of course not," Haruka said and this time, his jokes didn't calm the storm within, "It's just…" He searched for the right words to explain what he meant; this development would have consequences and Mr. Tachibana needed to be aware of that. "If Makoto accepts and everything goes as we want it to, then we'll all have a rough time ahead. He will have to quit working here and move to a different kingdom, and you might not be able to see him for quite some time. Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"If that's what he wants, then yes. Of course, I'll miss him. He's my son and I love him dearly, but it's his life, his happiness. So I will support him in whatever choice he makes," Mr. Tachibana vowed, "and I'm sure his mother feels the same way."

The verbal affirmation of their approval lifted a huge weight off Haruka's shoulders and he smiled to himself.

Anyone living in poverty would rejoice at an opportunity like this without considering exactly what it entailed, and no one could blame them for it. Marrying a prince from a prosperous kingdom was like a rope to haul you from a poisoned well, one that hoisted you as well as your whole family from the trenches. An offer only fools and madmen would refuse.

But the Tachibanas were different. Despite their troubles, their family was their wealth; they valued each other more than all the riches in the world. If their son wished to engage himself with Haruka, then they wanted him to do so for his own desire, not because of the financial benefit - which was ironic, considering the conditions under which they met. Happiness didn't pay the bills, but it had to be treasured when it was all you had left.

If anything, this was how Haruka preferred it. He wouldn't know how to act if Makoto's parents didn't treat him like they would any other suitor.

A large, scarred hand on his shoulder made Haruka look back at Mr. Tachibana. The teasing faded from his hickory eyes, replaced with sincerity. "You're a good man, Haruka," he said with that warm smile, "I'm sure you'll make him very happy."

What Mr. Tachibana hinted at didn't go unnoticed, and a huff of joy left Haruka's lips. "Thank you, sir."

"Sir?" Mr. Tachibana repeated with feigned pain in his voice. "No need for such formalities at this
point. Just call me 'Dad'."

The playfulness returned in full force and Mr. Tachibana laughed merrily at his own joke. Had a career as blacksmith not worked out for him, he might have had a bright future as a jester. He could make anyone laugh at his silly remarks, if not himself. While Haruka wasn't one for a hearty chuckle, he couldn't help but smile too.

"All jokes aside," Mr. Tachibana continued, ridding his head of comedic comments in favour of some serious talk, "You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Yes," Haruka affirmed, "I'm sorry this is on such a short notice, but I wanted to be sure before I asked."

"Sure that you want to share your life with him?"

He shook his head. "Sure that he wants to share his life with me. If it weren't for our situation, I would have liked for us to take our time so we could truly get to know each other, but alas time is a luxury we don't have. We have to take a leap of faith, but I'm confident. I hope he is, too."

"When are you going to ask him?"

"Tonight."

For the first time, a hint of worry flashed through Mr. Tachibana's irises, like everything suddenly felt real. "That's soon."

It was. While he wished Makoto would accept his proposal without hesitation, he wanted to give him some time to think about it before he jumped into the abyss with him. If his wishes were granted, then Makoto needed to process everything and come to terms with the changes that awaited him. To pack his belongings and say goodbye to his family and friends, to this town he grew up in. Time was not on their side, but he wanted to offer Makoto as much as he could.

Behind his frameless spectacles, Mr. Tachibana's eyes softened in a meld of understanding and gratitude. "You must have a lot to do for the big moment."

"I do," Haruka confirmed. He had a long mental list of all the things he had to do, from paying Mrs. Tachibana a visit and gathering groceries, to writing a letter to Nagisa and Rei to inform them of his plans and sending it off to the palace. The day ahead would be busy and probably a bit hectic, but it would be worth it in the end. He was sure of it.

"In that case, this old man won't hold you up with his jabbering any longer," Mr. Tachibana said as he picked up his polishing rag. "Good luck! I can't wait to hear his answer."

Although his time was scarce, Haruka could not take his leave just yet. The most important piece in this complicated puzzle lied here, in the hands of Mr. Tachibana.

"Actually, there's one more thing I would like to ask you."

Orange and pink hues intermingled in the evening sky to signify the sun's departure, bringing along the end of the workday for the townsfolk. The once lively streets were nearly vacant; the doors of the shops were closed and the signs turned in tandem, and the people who still roamed around were heading to their respective places to retire for the night.

Makoto was no exception. With a slight skip in his step, he hurried home. Because of an
unforeseen occurrence on his way back to town, he was late for supper.

After he weeded out a few sections of the Kunikida family's vegetable fields and left for the day, he strolled past the Natsume farm. A segment of their fence had caved in and one of the goats escaped from the meadow, wreaking havoc upon the rest of the property. Kaoru, the Natsume's son, was panting and wheezing as he tried to catch it, but it was to no avail.

When faced with issues like that, Makoto couldn't ignore what was happening and stalk off; he had to help out. While Mr. Natsume hammered his fence back shut, Makoto ran after the goat that, after having its first taste of freedom, was not eager to return to the life as livestock.

Eventually, the goat stranded at a dead end and he was able to capture and usher it back to the enclosure. The Natsumes were grateful for his assistance, but regretful that they couldn't pay him for his services - which was understandable, given the nature of the problem. Instead, they rewarded him a small block of cheese as compensation. It was more than he expected, so he gratefully accepted it.

With that settled, he hoped his food would still be warm when he got home. But more than that, he hoped Haruka and Sousuke would be there to join them for the meal - the former especially.

They hadn't seen each other since last night, when he escorted his prince and his guard back to the inn. Although he was used to working by himself, he had to admit that it had been rather lonely without Haruka today.

When he invited him to come along, Haruka explained he had some business to take care of, so he didn't press on. Even if Haruka wasn't busy, Makoto would understand if he didn't want to join him on his errands; Haruka brightened up his world, but he saw how much he struggled yesterday and he wouldn't want to put him through that discomfort again just because he longed for his presence.

That being said, the prospect of Haruka leaving tomorrow did increase the aching. The more time passed since their arrival in Sano, the more the expectation that Haruka would ask him to come back to Iwatobi with him dwindled. At the very least, Makoto wanted to spend the last days he was here together, but that wish wasn't granted either. Though he would never doubt Haruka's honesty, there was a part of him that thought his absence today was his answer.

But Makoto didn't want to give in to despair yet. Until he saw Haruka stepping into the carriage and riding out of this town, nothing was set in stone. That was the last sliver of faith he clung to.

He arrived home in record time and when he swung the door open, his heart sank.

There was no sight of Haruka or Sousuke in their small living room; only his parents and siblings sat around the table, eating rice with an assortment of vegetables and something that resembled the fish he had eaten in Iwatobi. The sight of it astonished him because they normally couldn't afford such a lavish meal. Their funds must have increased considerably if it was served now, and that brought a small smile to his face. He was curious to see if the twins would like fish as much as he did.

"I'm home," he called out with an exaggerated smile to mask his disappointment. He hung up his bag and took the block of cheese out of it. "I'm sorry I'm so late, on the way home one of-"

The defeat he felt didn't last long before it had to make place for confusion, that welled up to the forefront of his mind when he looked at the dinner table: there was no plate in front of his empty chair. Whenever he was running late, his plate of food would always stand ready for him to dig in the second he got home. By the looks of it, his family was already halfway through supper.
"What's going on?"

"Makoto, welcome back!" his mother said, and the others muttered similar phrases in varying levels of poorly concealed excitement. "You're not having dinner here tonight."

Ran and Ren snickered around their full mouths and a hint of a smirk played at his father's lips. Apparently, everyone knew about this except for him.

"I'm not?"

His mother grinned from ear to ear. "Someone is waiting for you at the town square."

"Someone?" Makoto questioned, but it was unnecessary. There was only one person who that could be. A beaming smile lit up his face as he inhaled sharply. "Haru!"

His father giggled at his reaction. "Better hurry up. You wouldn't want to leave him waiting, now would you?"

Makoto fiercely shook his head. He practically threw the cheese onto the countertop and then he ran back outside. "I'm going out," he yelled, and he was well out of the street before he could've heard a reply.

In less than a minute he got to the alley that led to the town square, having sprinted the entire way, and he took a moment to calm his frantic breathing. He coughed lightly to clear his throat, adjusted his hat and smoothed over his worn clothing. Before he walked through the alley, he breathed in deeply once more and straightened his back, desperate to appear nonchalant; the last thing he wanted was to look frazzled when he was meeting Haruka. He didn't know what awaited him on the other side, but all his doubts had withered.

There at the top of the stone steps sat Haruka, accompanied by Sousuke to protect him from the pickpockets and assassins that weren't present. The instant Makoto saw him, the world around him melted away. The corners of his mouth almost ripped because of the large grin he couldn't suppress. "Haru!"

Haruka looked up at the sound of his voice, and a tiny smile graced his features too. Though he just regained his composure, Makoto's pace sped up again, his feet closing the distance between them as fast as they could.

"Makoto."

"Sorry I'm so late," he started, figuring Haruka must have been waiting for some time now, "You wouldn't believe what happened on the- wait, where are you going?"

Upon Makoto's arrival, Sousuke promptly walked away from them. He ignored Makoto completely and his broad form grew smaller and smaller until he turned around the corner and vanished from sight.

Unfazed by his disappearance, Haruka replied in his guard's stead, "He's going off somewhere to lie with Rin."

"Oh. Oh." When he realised what Haruka meant, Makoto's eyes widened in shock and embarrassment stained his cheeks. The mental image of that flustered him beyond belief and once the thought was planted in his head, it couldn't be erased.

"I'm joking," Haruka assured, amusement twinkling in his gorgeous eyes, "I don't know where he's
"Oh," Makoto sighed and willed away the blush that burned in his cheeks, "I wouldn't be surprised if he's actually going to Rin. I think they fancy each other more than either of them would admit."

"He probably is. Either that or he's wandering around town aimlessly because he got lost on the way there."

Makoto chuckled and the weight of the day fell off him with every shake of his shoulders. It wasn't until his laughter ebbed away that he noticed what Haruka had assembled; he was seated on a big picnic blanket, laid out with the view of the deserted square and the peachy sky peeking out above the buildings in mind. Five lit candles on an ornate candle holder provided atmosphere as well as light in case the sun set before they were ready to leave. On the other side of the checkered blanket stood two baskets, the ones he brought with them from Iwatobi on their trip. Their contents were hidden by the shut lids, piquing Makoto's interest to discover the unknown.

"Anyway, what were you saying?"

"Nevermind that," Makoto brushed off, already forgotten about his own tale as curiosity engulfed him. "What's all this?"

"Business," Haruka said after a short pause, an adorable pink tinge dusting his cheekbones. "Come, sit down." He patted the spot next to him.

Giddiness churned through Makoto's stomach. He couldn't wait to see what other tricks Haruka had up his sleeve that he conveniently disguised as 'business'.

Not wanting to dirty Haruka's blanket, he leaned down to take off his muddy boots before he got onto it. Childlike enthusiasm gushed through his veins as he looked at Haruka, something no one else was able to induce in him.

Fortunately, the sentiment was mutual. A bashful smile adorned Haruka's lips as he reached into one of his baskets and he passed two metal cups to Makoto, who instantly recognised them as his father's handiwork. Then he took out an expensive-looking bottle that he uncorked with a soft pop.

When they each had a cup of the yellowish-white liquid in hand, Makoto clinked the rims together.

"Cheers!"

"To what?" Haruka asked, his voice kind yet expectant.

"To..." Us, was what Makoto wanted to say, but he couldn't get the word past his lips. He sifted through his brain for anything else, but their uncertain situation limited his options. "Happiness," he eventually concluded.

Haruka smiled. "To happiness," he repeated as he raised his cup and took a sip of the beverage.

Makoto followed suit. His flagon of water was long empty by the time he finished his work, so he gratefully gulped down half of his cup. It wasn't until he drank from it that he realised he had no clue what was inside; the drink had a strong smell and a funny taste unlike anything he'd ever had before. He couldn't help but make a face. "What is this?"

"Wine?" Haruka replied in bewilderment, "You've never had wine before?"

"No, alcohol is pretty expensive."
"But, back at home during dinner we-"

"I was Nagisa, remember?" Makoto interrupted, "Nagisa's still seventeen, so I wasn't served any alcohol."

"Oh, of course. Sorry," Haruka said, but Makoto simply shook his head.

While the consumption of alcohol by minors was not forbidden, it was frowned upon in the upper classes to serve something to a child that was meant for adults. Makoto was sure many paid no mind to it outside of official banquets or parties though; in his daily life, Nagisa probably drank whatever he pleased.

In Makoto's own circles, the norms weren't as strict. Despite this, he turned down every alcoholic beverage he got offered in the past. He never craved these types of drinks mainly because of their unpleasant scent, and he was afraid that he would start to once he got a taste of it. Knowing he couldn't afford it, accepting beer or whiskey would be nothing but torment. There were more important things to spend their money on.

That didn't even mention the slippery slope of debt he saw many men ensnaring themselves in when craving turned into addiction. Though no one in his family had succumbed to those temptations before, Makoto was not keen on becoming the first.

"I brought water too if you prefer that."

"No, it's fine!" It might taste a bit weird, but Makoto wasn't about to waste a fine, expensive drink - especially not since he was sharing it with Haruka. A drink or two would cause no harm. "I just have to get used to it, that's all."

"In that case, don't drink too much too quickly," Haruka advised, "I can't carry you home if you get drunk and pass out."

"I'll be careful," Makoto promised. His memories with Haruka were the most precious treasure he had, and he wouldn't allow the wine to steal this evening from him.

"Good," Haruka said as he put his cup down. "Are you hungry?"

"A little, yeah," Makoto replied, but a loud growl from his stomach immediately betrayed his true hunger.

Haruka snorted and reached into his basket again. This time, he took two lunch boxes out of it and handed one to Makoto. "I hope it's still warm."

There was but one way to find out and Makoto opened his box. Hot damps floated from the familiar food once the lid was removed: rice with a side of carrots, broccoli, onions and mushrooms, and a small fillet of mackerel chopped into bite-sized pieces.

His mouth watered as the delicious fragrance entered his nose. The food looked so good he had to stop himself from shovelling it directly down his throat and he glanced at Haruka with wonder. "Did you make this yourself?"

"I did," Haruka confirmed, "Your parents were kind enough to lend me your kitchen."

"It looks and smells amazing!"

"I hope it tastes good too," he said with an appreciative smile, "Making it was a bit more
challenging than last time."

"Because you had to work in such a small kitchen, with different tools and ingredients?"

"Because I had to work by myself."

Makoto huffed in disbelief. "You did most of the work last time so I'm sure you didn't need me at all."

"I do," Haruka said, voice small and vulnerable, eyes not leaving Makoto's.

The implication didn't go over his head; it sent tingles down his spine, tingles of hope and affection and the heat returned to his cheeks.

When Haruka saw his reaction, he quickly reasoned, "Everything took longer without your assistance." He tried to appear unperturbed, but it was futile; he averted his gaze and rummaged through his basket again to draw the attention away from the blush that tinted his skin too.

"Anyway, let's eat before it does get cold. I figured it would be difficult to eat here with a knife and fork so I cut everything up so we could use spoons."

"Thanks," Makoto said, smiling in endearment as he accepted the spoon. He knew not to push Haruka further when he changed the subject like this, and there was no need to in the first place.

Instead, his hunger triumphed over every other urge and he scooped up as much of the food as he could. A moan of delight involuntarily escaped him when he took a bite, his eyes falling shut to enjoy the taste to its fullest. The rice was soft and fluffy and the seasoning enhanced all the vegetables' individual qualities. That was not to mention the savouriness of the mackerel, that wrapped up the whole dish to create an explosion of flavour.

It wasn't the exact same as the meal they had prepared together in the palace's kitchen, but it was just as tasty; enough for him to want to inhale it like a ravenous, feral animal, but that went against all the etiquette he was taught.

"It's so good!" he praised, making an effort to chew slowly, "You really have a knack for this, Haru!"

"Thank you," Haruka mumbled and he stuffed a large chunk of mackerel in his mouth when the colour that rose to his cheeks brightened. "So what were you saying earlier?"

"Hm? Oh yes! The reason why I was late," Makoto said and he took a tiny sip of wine to rinse down his bite before he relayed the anecdote. "So I was weeding out some parts of the Kunikida family's garden - they have a vegetable farm where they grow eggplants and paprikas and the likes - and I finished right on time. But when I was walking home, I passed by the neighbours' farm, the Natsumes, who keep sheep and goats. A part of their fence collapsed and one of the goats had slipped through the opening. Mr. Natsume tried to keep the other animals from escaping too while his son went after the goat. But of course the goat was much faster than poor little Kaoru and the whole farm was in chaos, so I couldn't just stand there and watch!"

"So you were late because you were chasing a runaway goat?" Haruka asked with a quirked eyebrow, voice at the verge of a light chuckle.

Makoto was well aware of how strange this story sounded, especially to someone like Haruka. But if he was making excuses, he would have come up with something less obscure than this. "Yes!" he insisted, "Have you ever tried to catch a goat before?"
Haruka let out a hum of feigned contemplation. "I can't say that I have."

"Let me tell you, they're a lot faster than they look!"

That was the comment that broke the dam and made Haruka laugh. He probably envisioned the absurd scene in his head, which admittedly, was probably a lot funnier than actually chasing a frantic goat. "Well, did you catch it or not?"

"Of course, otherwise I'd still be running around for it," Makoto said with a tiny giggle of his own, "After a while, I trapped it in a corner near the shed and it had nowhere to go. I was able to throw a rope around its neck and guide it back to the meadow. Mr. Natsume hammered the fence back shut so it couldn't escape again."

"Poor goat," Haruka remarked, covering his lips with his fingers after he took another bite of mackerel, "It went through all that effort to break free and run away only to be captured again in the end."

"Yeah," Makoto agreed. He knew how important it was for the Natsume family's business, but he understood the goat like no other, wanting to shatter the shackles of confinement and obligation. "I'm sure it gets treated right where it is, but I suppose nothing beats freedom. But then again, if it lived in the wild it would get eaten by a wolf sooner or later."

"That's true," Haruka said, "I guess everything has its pros and cons."

"So did this; I was late for dinner, but the Natsumes did give me a block of cheese as a thanks. I would've brought it if I knew you were planning this. The Natsumes make the best goat cheese in Sano!"

"We can always eat it later."

Warmth filled his stomach at the sweet look on Haruka's face and Makoto nodded. "Anyway, how was your day?"

"Not as exciting as yours, apparently," he said, his smile turning into a smirk, "I didn't chase any goats."

"Usually I don't either. Today was an exception," Makoto swore. This was not what he wanted his legacy to be. "Enough about goats. What did you do?"

"I chased down everything I needed for dinner. Now I understand why you've never had fish prior to your visit to Iwatobi: it was expensive. One gold coin for two of these tiny fillets of mackerel!"

"I know. All the seafood comes from Hidaka, and the import taxes aren't exactly the cheapest. Especially because fish isn't preservable."

"It's ridiculous," Haruka grumbled, "When the alliance with Sano becomes official, I'll personally make sure good, affordable fish gets imported from Iwatobi from then on. Everyone deserves to have a decent mackerel on their plate at least once a day."

The corners of Makoto's lips inadvertently curled up. Haruka's passion for mackerel was honestly adorable, and though Makoto didn't love it as much as he did, he truly appreciated his kindness. "Wait, how many fillets did you buy?" he asked when he remembered the meal on the table at home.

"Six."
That confirmed Makoto's suspicions and as per usual, he wasn't sure whether to scold or to thank Haruka. "Haru, that's too expensive, I-
"

"I was cooking for us in your kitchen so I couldn't not cook for your family too," Haruka immediately cut in, "Besides, I can afford it."

Though it was hard to grasp that Haruka spent that much just on fish, his reasoning did make sense. "Thanks, Haru," Makoto muttered, smiling as he imagined the excited looks on Ran and Ren's faces.

They didn't eat meat every day because it was quite pricey and when they were fortunate enough to have it for dinner, they split two or three slices between the five of them. The twins absolutely loved meat and fought over every bite, which often resulted in Makoto giving his share to them too. Ran always said her dream in life was to eat an entire steak by herself, and having a small fillet of mackerel she didn't have to share with anyone was a fair beginning to realising it.

Perhaps Haruka could not only make his dreams come true, but those of his family, too.

"But what about Sousuke?" Makoto wondered. The guard wasn't at his house for dinner and hadn't joined them on their little picnic either.

Haruka shrugged. "When we were fetching groceries, I asked if he would be eating with us too so I'd know how much to get, but he declined. He's probably mooching off of the Matsuokas right now."

Makoto was sure Sousuke preferred it this way, and he would be lying if he said he minded his absence. The guard was missing out though; while Makoto wouldn't dare to insult Mrs. Matsuoka's cooking skills, he knew that whatever meal she was serving couldn't compare to the one he had in front of him. "Well, whatever he's having, it can't be better than this."

Haruka looked away and didn't say a thing, overwhelmed by the stream of compliments; Makoto might have been illiterate, but he was fluent in reading Haruka's expressions. It felt like he had been for his entire life, but truly, every minute they spent together was like the turn of a page that taught him more and drew him further into the novel of Prince Haruka Nanase. A novel he never wanted to put down again.

And maybe he wouldn't have to either.

The peachy heavens slowly bled to indigo as they finished up their meal in the company of flickering candles and frivolous chattering. The sun was no longer visible from where they were seated, but its glow lingered in the sky to extend its stay.

Not a grain of rice remained in Makoto's lunch box by the time he put down his spoon. When he was in Iwatobi, the endless current of food proved how small his appetite was but now, he dearly wished there were seconds. Was it not to still his hunger, then to stretch out their time together.

"Thanks for the meal," Makoto said as he put the lid back on the box. "It really was amazing."

A slight smile of gratitude graced Haruka's face. "Shall we have dessert now or do you want to wait a little before we continue?"

The notion of dessert made Makoto's ears perk up. On any other day, he would have wanted to dig in straight away, especially because he had a fair idea as to what this dessert was, but he held
himself back this time. "Let's wait."

Haruka nodded and he put the empty lunch boxes back into the basket, his expression illegible - this was a chapter Makoto hadn't deciphered yet, and he was excited to get to it. Haruka refilled their cups and took a big swig of wine. A deep breath followed and he closed his eyes for just a moment before he said, "I have something for you."

Unlike dessert, Makoto had no clue what this something could be and his heart skipped a beat. Anticipation surged through his veins as Haruka turned his back to him and reached for the second basket, the one he hadn't opened yet. Makoto bit his bottom lip, gaze glued to Haruka's hands as the mystery surrounding the basket was unveiled.

"I haven't grown them myself, but I did assemble them, so I hope you like them," Haruka said as he pulled out an arrangement of flowers.

"Haru," Makoto gasped in surprise; he had received flowers before, a stray buttercup and a wild daisy, but never a grand bouquet like this. His hands shook as he accepted it, thorns jabbing in his calloused skin, but he could barely feel it because his mind was captivated by the gesture. "They're beautiful."

Cornered by leaves and four large hydrangeas, purple and pink, was a myriad of red roses, all framing a single white rose in the center. Small, dainty orange blossoms were woven through the bouquet to tie it together both in form and in meaning. A silky red ribbon held the flowers together, the finishing touch of this astonishing present.

Back in Iwatobi, Haruka told him a lot about the language of flowers and though he had paid close attention, all their meanings but one drifted from his mind when he studied the bouquet with his mouth agape. Apparently, they stand for eternal love.

"I'm glad," Haruka murmured, a tiny smile lifting his blossomed cheeks.

"I love them but… what's the occasion?" Makoto asked, frightened by the thought of it being a gift goodbye.

"I… There's something I want to talk with you about. Something I need to ask you."

For a moment his heart ceased beating and the oxygen was stolen from his lungs. All of the hopes and dreams and fears that generated and prospered during their time together flashed before his eyes. Deep down, he knew what Haruka was going to ask him, but he didn't dare to believe it. Not until he heard him speak those words loud and clearly.

Haruka's head was downturned, facing his lap as he fumbled with the gold band around his finger. The liquid courage didn't seem to settle, for the pause stretched thinner and thinner and the tension became more palpable with every second.

Makoto put the bouquet next to him on the ground and covered his hand, wrapping his fingers around his. He didn't mean to rush Haruka because he would wait as long as he needed, but he had to know no topic was taboo; he could ask him whatever he wanted, tell him everything that was on his mind.

Upon feeling the gentle touch, Haruka raised his head and he smiled when he saw the unyielding patience and confidence residing in Makoto's gaze. It was infectious; the fragments of doubt vanished from his profound sapphires and were replaced with determination.

"Will you come back home with me, to Iwatobi?" Haruka asked, and the moment those words
vibrated through the air, the hesitancy returned to punch him in the gut. "I know it's a lot to ask, and I'm sorry it's on such a short notice; I wish we had more time to truly get to know each other before making decisions this big. But we don't, so I have to ask now because I don't want to go back without you. This past week has been the best week of my entire life and I've never been so happy before, and I don't want this to end. I want to be with you. Of course, we don't have to get married right away, but-

"Wait," Makoto interrupted his rambling. Haruka was talking so fast it was hard to keep up and his brain short-circuited at the very first question. With a slight delay, everything was processed and Makoto's jaw slackened when he realised what Haruka was actually saying. "Are you proposing to me?"

"I am," Haruka confirmed with an assertive nod, so lost in his story he forgot to ask that specific question. He reached into the pocket of his trousers, hidden behind his lengthy cobalt coat, and pulled out a small box. "Like I said, we don't have to get married right-

"Haru!"

Overcome by enthusiasm and euphoria, Makoto flung himself at Haruka and knocked them both down, sending the velvety box flying. He didn't waste another breath before he pressed their lips together rather harshly, yet with immense passion.

This was what he'd been longing to hear ever since Haruka discovered his true identity, but it felt like it was too good to be true, because it was. Unbelievable, there was no other word to describe it.

When he realised how he ambushed Haruka in the middle of his sentence, Makoto began to pull away so he could apologise. But before their lips could part, Haruka's hand on his cheek drew him in for more. His arm wrapped around Makoto's shoulder as he kissed him with an urgency not yet expressed.

Oh, how he had missed the softness of Haruka's lips against his own, and his eyelids fell shut to savour this kiss like it deserved to be. The reins of self-control slipped to let Makoto lose himself in his beautiful prince like he had wanted to for centuries now. This kiss was long overdue but well worth the wait.

He cradled Haruka's neck to cushion it from the cobblestone ground beneath the blanket and briefly wondered if he hit his head on the rough way down. But soon, the town square around them melted away for the second time that evening and with it, every thought inside his own head. They were floating through the sky on a cloud of hope and affection, far above the spikes of reality that lurked to pop it. At that moment, Makoto's plane of existence couldn't hold anything but Haruka.

Who would have guessed that their second kiss would be even better, even more magical than their first? It wasn't strange, because this time around, there were no lies. No façades. Only two hearts opening up to let each other in, in a way they never had to anyone else before. That was the greatest feeling in the world.

Yearning to hear the rest of his proposal, Makoto had no choice but to end the tender kiss. The twinge of remorse in his stomach was drowned out by the knowledge that there would be many more to follow.

"Sorry for tackling you so suddenly," Makoto said as he gently pulled Haruka back up and dusted off the back of his fancy coat. "Did I hurt you?"

Haruka shook his head. "It's fine; I'm fine."
"I'm glad," Makoto said and the bulk of worry was lifted off his heart, "Sorry, please finish what you were saying."

When he gathered his thoughts, Haruka continued from where he was promptly, but not undesirably deflected, "We don't have to get married right away, but in order for us to be taken seriously, it's best if our relationship is official."

With every word Makoto's smile widened. Though Haruka should've known what his answer would be given his uncontainable elation just now, his cheeks were dyed rosy with bashfulness as he took Makoto's hands in his once more.

"So, Makoto Tachibana, will you marry me?"

Waking up next to Haruka in the palace and sharing a feast with him in bed, afterwards strolling through the garden overflowing with gorgeous flowers and swarmed with cats. Stealing tiny kisses as Haruka taught him how to read and write, entwining their fingers when they played piano together, stepping on his toes for the millionth time as they twirled around the ballroom in each other's arms to music he still wasn't familiar with and laughing every time. Falling asleep in his embrace after a day that was pleasantly tiring, and looking forward to doing it all over again when the sun came up.

"Yes!" Despite knowing this question was coming, hearing it aloud made fireworks shoot through his body, and he couldn't resist pressing another chaste kiss to Haruka's lips. But when he withdrew himself, his grin dripped off. "What's wrong?"

Unlike what he expected, Haruka didn't match his joy. Instead, scepticism twisted his features. It stung.

Haruka's lips moved, but no sound left them as he tried to collect his doubts. "Are you sure about this?" he asked with vivid reluctance.

"What?" Makoto said, puzzled by the shift in mood, "Of course I'm sure! Haru, I-"

"No," Haruka cut him off, squeezing his hands insistently, "You need to think this through carefully. This is a huge decision, one that's going to change your life forever. From now on, nothing will ever be the same again. Not like how it was before you met me, but not like this past week either. Even if we get my parents' permission, that won't be the end of our hardships; if anything, that's where our hardships begin. You'll have to learn everything I was taught in the past nineteen years, from all kinds of subject matters like economics and mathematics and history, to how to carry yourself and how to hold a proper conversation and everything in between. And in the meanwhile, we'll be expected to go to conferences and attend banquets, and we'll travel throughout the entire kingdom to meet our folk and try to appease their troubles. I can guarantee it won't be easy."

Admittedly, Makoto hadn't thought about that. During their brief time together, Nagisa complained endlessly about his studies and duties and obligations, and he wasn't even the crown prince of an enormous kingdom like Haruka was. He should have known the future wouldn't be as bright and carefree as he always envisioned, yet when he looked at Haruka, that was all he could see. A future filled with warmth.

"Once we get to the point that my parents support us, there'll be no going back," Haruka pressed on, the crease of his eyebrows deepening. "Are you sure you're willing to sacrifice your whole life for this, just so you can be with me?"
Despite the pleading tone of his voice, Makoto smiled. "I am," he said, because this was what he'd been hoping for in every minute he spent with Haruka, and even long before then. To turn his life around, to get a fresh start. He'd give up everything in a heartbeat if it meant he could be with Haruka. "Don't say I have to think about this, because I have been thinking about this the entire time, since the moment I first saw you. I want to be with you too, Haru, and I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

Finally, the grave expression on Haruka's face softened into a relieved, grateful one. "Thank you," he murmured as he drew Makoto in for a hug. "I promise I'll do everything within my might so we can be together."

Makoto kissed Haruka's hair and closed his eyes to soak up this feeling. But the happiness was baseless, because Haruka's words echoed and echoed through his head like a grim reminder of where they currently stood. They hadn't climbed the steep mountain yet, they merely agreed they'd attempt to conquer it together. In a way, they were as far off as they had been since Haruka stormed out of the throne room and Makoto was left to pick up the pieces of the heart he personally shattered.

"But," he mumbled under his breath, pulling out of their embrace. "How on earth are we going to get your parents to allow us to be together? We don't have a trump card this time, not like we did with Nagisa's parents."

"I know," Haruka sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose as he pondered, "I'll figure it out. We might not have a trump card, but I do have some leverage."

"You do?"

"Hm," he hummed, "I'm the crown prince. They need me to lead the kingdom, so they'll have to listen to what I have to say. If they don't, I'll threaten to relinquish the throne."

Makoto pursed his lips. "Do you think they'd be sensitive to such a threat?"

"They have to be, because I'm the only person in line," Haruka said with a smirk, "I have no siblings, my father has no siblings, my grandmother had no siblings; it's customary in our family to only have one child. Unless my parents wish to have another child that can become their heir, I'm all they've got."

It sounded like a great advantage; after all, what was a kingdom without a king or queen? But the doubtful side of Makoto remained. "What if they do have another child, or if they find someone else to take the throne?"

"Then I'll gladly surrender my title to them."

"I, what?" Makoto questioned in disbelief, surprised by the confidence in his voice, "You would do that for me?"

"Of course," Haruka said, "I'm asking the same of you, am I not?"

"Well yes, but it's not the same," Makoto thought, "My life can only get better from here on out but yours... I can't possibly ask you to give up everything you have, your whole life filled with luxury, just so you can come wallow in the gutter with me."

"You should know by now that I don't care about-"

"No, Haru," he interrupted, "You have to listen to me. Poverty is no joke. There will be times when
you won't have food, or no warm clothes in the winter, or shoes with holes in them and no money to fix them or to buy new ones. You'll get dirty and there won't be any soap, you'll get sick and there won't be any medicine, and you'll have to work in spite of it. You'll have to work and work and work for the rest of your life without a break just so you can stay alive. It's constant suffering, even when you're happy. I can't do that to you, Haru. I won't."

"Makoto, listen," Haruka said as he grabbed Makoto's face in his hands, forcing him to meet his gaze. "It will be fine. Things will get better no matter what because frankly, I already have a head start. I have connections and I'm highly educated in many different fields, so it'll be easier for me to get a decent job than it was ever for you."

Again, Haruka did have a point, but the thought of him giving up the life Makoto always dreamt of just so they could be together left a bitter taste in his mouth. It didn't seem worth it on Haruka's part.

Another sigh left his lips and he averted his eyes as he let his hands slip from Makoto's cheeks. He leaned back on his palms, staring off into the dark alleyway ahead. "I don't know if living here in this town with you is going to make me happy," he stated matter-of-factly. When he turned to face Makoto again, his lips curled up into a small smile and he said, "But I do know that going back to Iwatobi and being married off to someone else is going to make me very unhappy."

"Haru…"

"You said you'd do whatever it takes for us to be together, and so will I," he said, "If worst comes to worst, I can always ask the Hazuki family for a job in the palace. After all, Nagisa owes us."

Knowing Nagisa, he'd probably jump at the opportunity to have his new friends closeby and offer them any job they'd ask for. With the royal wedding in sight, a new tutoring position could open up soon and Haruka might be the right fit for it. Weird as it seemed, that thought was somewhat comforting.

"But it's not going to get to that point," Haruka said tenaciously, "My parents are going to allow us to be together, whether they like it or not."

Although it sounded overconfident, Haruka was right. No one ever won a battle they went into with apprehension, so they shouldn't give up hope before Haruka even spoke with King and Queen Nanase. For now, they should hold on to their faith; perhaps believing in themselves would take them a long way on this obstacle-riddled road.

And yet, Makoto's qualms were ever-present. In fact, they grew heavier and heavier the more he mulled over them, because their issues didn't end there.

"But what about your bloodline?" If it weren't for the grandchild and heir he would bring forth, Makoto doubted if Haruka's parents would have married him off this eagerly to the first unwed 'princess' they encountered. Thus, this whole situation could have been resolved pretty easily if Makoto was a young, fertile maiden. But he wasn't. "Even if your parents were to support us, the kingdom would eventually be without a ruler because we can't have children together."

Haruka clicked his tongue in annoyance. This appeared to be something that had crossed his mind too, and it was a huge setback. They could attempt to blackmail his parents into acknowledging their relationship, but it would be fruitless if they couldn't clear this hurdle along with it.

"Maybe you could have a child with someone else, like a mistress…?" Makoto hated to propose it and the acidic words burned in his mouth when he spoke them, but he had no choice but to throw
the option out there.

Thankfully, Haruka looked revolted by the mere thought. "Absolutely not. I don't want to be like that with anyone but you."

Makoto lit up like a lighthouse on a foggy night when the insinuation of that got through to him. Though it was a relief that they shared the same viewpoint, he wasn't prepared for Haruka to put it that bluntly.

The colour adorning his cheeks and the awkward look in his eyes made Haruka realise what he had implied, and he whipped his head down. Flustered, his face rapidly began to match the blanket beneath him, patches of red disrupting the monotonous white.

The idea of being like that with Haruka was not an appalling one, quite the opposite, and Makoto would be lying if he claimed he'd never toyed with those kinds of thoughts before. But, despite them already being engaged after no more than a week since their ingenuine first meeting, that was one step too far for Makoto just yet. If asked, he was sure Haruka would agree. They'd get there eventually, when the turbulent circumstances smoothed over and they got accustomed to spending their lives together, whether that be in Iwatobi or in Sano.

"Besides," Haruka continued after clearing his throat, "I'm sure my parents wouldn't be pleased to have a bastard as their heir."

The prospect of that was as much positive as it was negative. Positive, for hot bile crawled up Makoto's throat at the sheer concept, but negative because it was their only option. At least, the only option he was aware of at this point in time.

Strained silence wrapped around them as they tried to find an answer to this enigma. But the more Makoto pondered, the further he strayed from solutions and the more he could feel tears stinging behind his eyes. How he wished they were tears of joy.

This was another instance in which he longed to be a bit more like Nagisa. Despite the adversities he faced, Nagisa always seemed to be able to turn things around to his benefit. To guide the pieces on the chessboard to his victory even if no such outcome was in sight. In the most unconventional way possible, running away from home right before his departure to Iwatobi resulted in him being allowed to marry Rei like he wanted to from the start. If only Makoto had been born with that dash of luck, too.

At the very least, he wanted to live in the moment more, to bask in today rather than to worry for tomorrow. He'd been worrying and worrying for as long as he could remember, and he was done. For once, he wanted to let his concerns sail and celebrate; after all, getting engaged to the most beautiful person you'd ever met was something that deserved to be celebrated. Something to shout from the rooftops, or even just throughout the vacant town square like a song straight from his heart.

With his life being so work and family-driven, Makoto hadn't given marriage any thought prior to this whole adventure, much less the engagement that preceded it. If he had, he probably would have imagined it to be a waterfall of bliss, a feeling of unwavering happiness and love despite the somewhat unfavourable circumstances life rained down upon them. Never could he have fathomed it would be this bittersweet.

Haruka let out a loud groan, a deep rumble that startled Makoto from his reverie.

"Let's stop thinking about this for now," he said, dragging his hands over his face like he could rub
the troublesome, conflicting feelings from his pores. "There's nothing we can do about it at this point, and I'm sure we'll figure it out eventually."

Forgetting about the upcoming strife with Haruka's parents was difficult, especially because Makoto had no part in it and could only wait while Haruka stepped up to the fight. But Haruka's gentle smile had healing properties, and the affection it emitted returned his hope. It locked up his fears for the future to let joy reign for the time being.

"You're right," Makoto said, and the corners of his mouth were tugged upwards despite himself.

"Now, let's get back to the part where you said 'yes'," Haruka muttered under his breath as he patted the ground around himself. "We got engaged but you haven't accepted your ring, so it's not official yet."

It wasn't until then that Makoto remembered the little box he unceremoniously catapulted out of Haruka's hand. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he said, and he frantically got up to search for the box too.

"Nevermind, I found it," Haruka said as he pulled it out behind one of the baskets. "Now, let's try this again."

Using their current positions to his advantage, Haruka got up on one knee and opened the box to reveal a gold band sitting within its velvety clutch. Makoto bit back a chuckle; it was more than obvious what Haruka was going to ask him at this point, yet the jittery butterflies that hatched when he first saw Haruka fluttered nonetheless.

The smile on Haruka's face was as sweet as ever when he asked, "Makoto, will you marry me?"

"There's nothing I want more," Makoto said, and he meant it with all his heart.

Haruka removed the ring from the box, which was left abandoned beside them on the blanket, and Makoto held out his hand so he could easily access his spread fingers. With care and grace, Haruka slid the ring in place and the metal felt cool against his heated skin, but not unpleasantly so. To top it off, Haruka pressed a kiss to his knuckles.

Laughter bubbled up from Makoto's stomach and he wanted to pull Haruka towards him, but instead found himself being pulled down until he was on his knees too. It didn't matter if they were standing or sitting, for their lips met in a tender kiss all the same. Somehow, it was like every kiss they shared was better than the previous one, and Makoto wasn't afraid to test this theory.

When Haruka ultimately ended the kiss, he rested his forehead against Makoto's and cupped his cheeks. Makoto opened his eyes and meeting Haruka's abashed but assured gaze made him feel like he was being submerged in the lake again. But there was no panic or fear this time. His breath was warm as it ghosted over Makoto's lips, and he was about to lean back in for more, but then Haruka spoke.

"Everything will be alright," he whispered, a vow so soft Makoto had to listen closely to make out every word. "As long as I have you; as long as we have each other, everything will be alright."

With the future being as uncertain as it was, that was tough to believe. Yet, because Haruka vocalised it in spite of his own reservations, because his eyes shimmered with such conviction, Makoto felt like it really was true. And with it, the fluctuating feelings that had him so divided finally settled. It would be foolish to forgo his doubts completely, but hope prevailed.

Pretty much every story had a happy ending, and Makoto believed theirs would, too.
"Thank you, Haru," he murmured and he captured Haruka's lips in another kiss that conveyed his gratitude as well as his adoration.

The goofy smile that surfaced like it always would when he was caught in Haruka's spell - which, nowadays, was often - made Haruka break away from their intimacy. He abruptly turned around and scoured through one of his baskets to ward off the blush that crept up to his cheeks.

"Time for dessert."

A chuckle of endearment welled up his throat, but Makoto didn't want to embarrass Haruka further so he swallowed it before it could boil over. While he waited for him to serve the delayed but no less anticipated dessert, he lifted his hand to take a proper look at the ring that embellished his finger.

In the light of the flickering candles, the band shone with beauty; beauty in its simplicity. There were no fancy details and the design wasn't particularly intricate either. It was a gold ring, plain and straightforward, just like him. Nevertheless, it was brilliant, crafted with precision and thought. A perfect fit in every single way.

A single glance betrayed the smith who had forged it, and that made the ring even more special. Equal parts baffled and touched by Haruka's thoughtfulness, he couldn't do anything but smile.

"Did my father make this?" he asked despite knowing what the answer would be, and the second the phrase rolled over his tongue, he gasped loudly. "Oh Haru, what about my family?"

He was such a fool. For the past eighteen years, his family had been his number one priority; the reason he got out of bed every dreadful day, why he fought so hard and why he sacrificed himself and his own well-being. And yet, one kind, handsome prince proposing to him was enough to sweep him off his feet and make him forget all about his dear parents and treasured siblings. Not once had he considered the consequences his decision would have for them when he knew damn well how his departure would impact their lives.

That was not even to mention how much he would miss them. He claimed he'd do anything to be with Haruka, but was giving up his family included in that anything? It certainly wasn't, but he didn't want to lose Haruka either. His greedy, greedy heart wanted to have them all, which made choosing between the love of his life and his beloved family an impossible feat.

His stupidity was immeasurable.

Fortunately, Haruka wasn't so ignorant.

"They can come too!" he hastily assured, "They can live with us in the palace, or if they don't want that, then a house will be arranged for them nearby. Or, if they don't want that either, if they want to stay here in Sano, then you can go see them as often as you want- well, not as often as you want, because we'll be very busy, but." He halted when he realised he was rambling and his frenzy died out on his empty breath. In a quieter, more composed tone, he continued, "You don't have to worry about them. I'll make sure they get all the financial aid they need regardless of what they want to do and that you can see each other as often as possible."

That was enough to dissolve the huge burden on Makoto's shoulders and his posture relaxed as he sighed, "Thank you."

Now he was thinking about his family again, he got a bit unsure of himself, afraid of their reaction to their engagement. Although they hadn't been anything but supportive in the past, this situation
was rather strange and frankly, a total mayhem. Compared to the three years of pining his parents went through before sharing their first kiss, the week Haruka and he had known each other was a mere first impression in their eyes. But his feelings for Haruka were genuine and true, and he hoped his parents would see that, too.

"I wonder what my parents would think about all of this," he mused, unable to keep his concerns to himself, "They nearly had a heart attack when they met you, so I don't know how they'll react to our engagement."

"I already talked to your parents," Haruka said, "I asked your mother if I could use your kitchen to prepare the food, so it would only be right to let her in on my plans. And I wanted your father to make the ring so I had no choice but to tell him. I did ask him for your hand first, though."

"Really?" Makoto asked in surprise because he hadn't reckoned Haruka would take the formal route. The two-course meal and the glimmering ring meant his parents endorsed Haruka's planned proposal to a certain degree, but that didn't erase his curiosity. "What did they say?"

Haruka smiled fondly. "They both said the same thing: that they would support whatever decision you'd make."

That was the response Makoto could have expected, but it was very comforting to hear nonetheless. He cared about his parents and their opinion so much, and the weight of their love pressed down onto his finger, encapsulated by the gold band. The ring was a symbol of Haruka's undying affection, but it was molded from his family's support. He would forever carry a piece of his five most important people with him.

Makoto grasped at the ring with his other hand and hugged it to his chest, close to his heart where his loved ones were safekept. An affectionate smile stretched his cheeks when he looked back at Haruka.

It probably wasn't traditional in Haruka's circles, but Makoto wanted this engagement ring to be his wedding ring too. How could there ever be a ring other than this one? "Did my father make you a ring, too?"

"No," Haruka said with a shake of his head and he held up his own hand, "I already have a ring."

Makoto squinted to make out the band that adorned Haruka's finger in the dim candlelight, and when he saw it was the one he made no more than a few days ago, he gasped. "Haru, that can't be your ring!"

Thin eyebrows furrowed challengingly. "Why not?"

"Because," Makoto mumbled, averting his gaze from Haruka's sceptical one. While he appreciated the thought because he did pour a lot of love into it, he hadn't made it with the intention for it to be Haruka's wedding ring. He wasn't so delusional that he found his father's goldsmithing work to be flawless, but it was leagues better than his own. Something his father created would suit Haruka so much more. "It's ugly. It's crooked and it has dents, like it's old and was made a century-"

"It's not ugly," Haruka cut him off sternly, almost insulted, "You made this with your own hands, so it could never be ugly."

"In that case, at least let me make you another one, a better one-"

"No," he insisted and he covered the ring with his free hand as if to protect it from Makoto's scrutinising stare. "This one is perfect."
"Perfect?" Makoto raised an eyebrow and many more protests formed on his tongue, but they all simmered down when Haruka smiled.

"Its imperfections are what makes it perfect."

That actually made Makoto's heart skip a beat. How could he object to that?

"Now, let's finally have dessert," Haruka said and he turned around to retrieve another lunch box from his basket, "Otherwise we'll still be here tomorrow morning."

Makoto chuckled. It wasn't a bad prospect, staying here with Haruka and talking until the candles burned up and the melted wax stuck to the arms of the candelabra, until they fell asleep in each other's arms underneath a blanket of stars. But dessert was no bad prospect either. "I could definitely go for some dessert now."

Although it contained no actual cherries, the large slice of chocolate cake was the sweet cherry on top of their even sweeter engagement. What it did contain was a thick layer of frosting and Makoto could almost taste the sugar just by looking at the droplets that trickled down the side. He couldn't wait to sink his teeth in it; mackerel and vegetables were great, but nothing beat chocolate cake.

"It's a bit different from the one we made and the one we got at the baker's stall, but I hope you'll still like it," Haruka said as he handed him a small fork.

"I know I will," Makoto vowed, and he didn't waste another breath before he dug into the chocolate mountain. No matter how many times he had it, it tasted like heaven every time. And the fact that Haruka took the effort to make it himself rather than buying it at a bakery only made it better. "It's amazing, Haru! Are you not having any?"

"I am," Haruka mumbled, reaching for the bottle of wine, "but I thought we should have a refill with the cake."

"Sounds good." Makoto hadn't adjusted to the alcohol's unique flavour yet, but he could never turn down a drink with his fiancé. His fiancé. The term alone reduced his insides to a mush of pride and giddiness. He was so blessed to be allowed to call Haruka that from now on.

His fiancé poured the wine into the cups, and once they both had one in hand, Haruka clinked the rims together. "Cheers!" he said, mimicking the way Makoto had earlier that night.

A grin teased at Makoto's mouth and he bit his lip to suppress it, but it was in vain. "To what?" he played along in their reenactment.

Haruka mirrored his expression, his beautiful eyes lighting up with glee as he diverged from the script.

"To us."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and I hope you liked it!

A bit of "trivia" about the flowers in Makoto's bouquet; Haru chose hydrangeas because they're his favourite flowers, so they represent him, roses for Makoto, and the
orange blossoms because they tie them together through their love. As for the flowers' colours and meaning (according to my google searches, at least, haha.)
- Hydrangea, pink: heartfelt emotion
- Hydrangea, purple: desire to deeply understand
- Rose, red: romance, love
- Rose, white: marriage, new beginnings
- Orange blossoms: marriage, eternal love

The next chapter is in the works and is still scheduled to come out on Rei's birthday (December 14th). I'm trying my hardest to make it happen, but forgive me if it's a bit late; there should definitely be another update of this fic before the end of the year, so I hope you'll stick around for that! :)

In the meanwhile, you can find me on Twitter and Tumblr @DatHeetJoella for more MakoHaru stuff in between updates. I often share snippets of the upcoming chapters/fics before they come out, among other MakoHaru things.

Thank you again for reading, I hope to see you at the next chapter but for now, I wish you a lovely day! ^^
Family Matters

Chapter Summary

Everyone was delighted to hear about Makoto and Haruka's engagement, especially Ran and Ren. But their excitement soon dwindled when they realised it meant their brother would leave them.

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday to Rei! He's not in this chapter but we love him nonetheless.

So this chapter is quite a bit shorter than the usual, because I've once again decided to split one chapter into two. When I finished the initial chapter 10, it was only 15k so nothing too outrageous for me, but when I proofread the whole chapter in one sitting, I actually got dizzy and my head ached a lot. If I already had that as the author who's familiar with the content, I figured that meant it was just too much. Since there were two main parts in the chapter, it was easy to split up anyway.

Because of this, the chapter count got higher again, but the 15 chapters I've planned out currently are still a rough estimate and we'll see where we end up once everything gets written.

I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two little noses were pressed up against the window, vaporising the glass with their heated breath. The fog contorted the scene that played off behind it, but four curious eyes could be made out peeking above the wooden frame as they supervised the dark street. Was it not for the brightly-lit room behind them, their presence would have been concealed and their ambush successful, but now, they were the first thing Haruka and Makoto saw when they arrived at the Tachibana residence.

Neither had wanted to burst their engagement-bubble that dyed everything in a rosy tinge and protected them from the jagged edges of reality, so they had prolonged their picnic as much as they could. When the last crumbs had vanished from the lunch boxes and the night truly broke through, Makoto was about to have his third cup of wine and Haruka determined it was best to quit while they were ahead and take their leave. Admittedly, Makoto could handle the alcohol better than predicted; he appeared to be as sober as he had earlier that evening, but Haruka wasn't about to push their luck. There was a time and a place for everything, and the time to see how many glasses of wine Makoto could sustain before he lost control was not then.

Thus, they'd packed up their belongings and trudged homeward, fingers interlocked as the crescent moon smiled down upon them. Makoto's house wasn't far from the town square, so Haruka soaked up every step of the way before their bubble was crudely popped by a pair of overzealous eleven-year-olds.
The instant they spotted Makoto and Haruka, the front door flung open and Ren and Ran sped outside to be the first to hear the news.

Upon their appearance, Makoto let his grip on Haruka's hand falter. He didn't want to confront his younger siblings with their relationship so directly and Haruka understood that, but his skin was left cold by the ghost of his touch even in the night's pleasantly warm air.

"And, and?" the twins pressed when they were in front of their big brother, small mouths agape and buzzing with anticipation, "What did you say?"

Makoto chuckled at their enthusiasm, and he switched the basket he was holding over to his other hand. "I said yes!" he revealed and flashed Ran and Ren the gold band that graced his finger.

"Yes!"
"Yay!"

The twins yelled out in unison, cheering loudly and sharing high fives as though this was the result they had hoped for. It brought a tiny smile to Haruka's lips.

They were the sole members of Makoto's family he hadn't asked for permission, so to know they were this ecstatic about their engagement was heartwarming. While he probably wouldn't let his siblings' opinion dictate his choice about whom he married or adored, Makoto would surely be disappointed if they didn't like his partner. In a way, their approval might've been the most important of all, so their reaction relieved Haruka immensely.

"Hey, Haru?" Ran called out, abruptly tugging Haruka from his thoughts as she peered up at him with large, mossy eyes that were identical to her mother's.

"Yes?"
"If you're a prince and Makoto marries you, does that mean Makoto will be a prince too?"

"Yes." Haruka's smile softened. 'Prince Makoto' had a nice ring to it, but he'd already known that much. The title had been resonating through his mind ever since Makoto told him his real name. Now, it felt so much more tangible; he could only become King Haruka if he had Prince Makoto by his side.

"So if my brother is a prince, does that mean I'm a princess?" Ran continued without missing a beat.

"And I'm a prince too?" Ren said with a loud gasp like the idea never crossed his mind before.

Those were the most urging questions Haruka had heard in a long time, yet their nature forced him to repress a snort. They sounded so hopeful, how could he possibly shatter that dream? "I think it does," he lied with a matter-of-factly nod.

"Yes!"
"Yay!"

Their pitchy voices bounced off the brick walls, echoes rippling throughout the quiet street. In addition to their cries of joy, they danced around each other in triumph, almost as if they were trying to summon another season of rain upon their land.
Haruka winked at Makoto, who smiled in appreciation and mouthed a silent 'thank you'. For now, there was no harm in letting them believe in that fantasy. Even if they'd never be a prince and a princess officially, they were to Haruka. He was sure the people of Iwatobi wouldn't mind to have an adorable set of twins like Ran and Ren as part of the royal family too, so who cared about the rules?

"Shall we continue this celebration inside?"

That warm voice tore Haruka's gaze away from Makoto's handsome features, and it wandered over to the doorstep of the house. There, his soon-to-be parents-in-law waited with smiles more subdued but no less loving.

"We wouldn't want the whole town to hear about their engagement before we did, right?" Mrs. Tachibana said, gently ushering her rowdy kids back inside so they wouldn't disturb the neighbours.

"Did you hear that, Mom?" Ran said, complying but not lowering the volume of her voice, "Haru says I'm a princess!"

"And I'm a prince!" Ren added, ever afraid to be left out.

"Yes, I heard. That's great!" she said with feigned amazement as she closed the door behind them. Her gaze drifted to the basket clasped between Makoto's fingers, or more specifically, to the flowers that stuck out of the half-open lid. "My, what a beautiful bouquet," she said in awe, genuine this time.

"Haru gave it to me," Makoto replied with a coy smile - as if the explanation was necessary. He put the basket on the floor and took the flowers out so he could show them to his family in their full glory.

"Beautiful," she repeated and she took a deep whiff of one of the hydrangeas. "And they smell so good too! Shall I put them in a vase?"

"If you will, thanks." Makoto handed the bouquet over to his mother, who brought them to the counter and filled up a vase she pulled out of one of the cupboards.

The flowers claimed their spot on the center of the table, their ribbon tied around the vase instead. Instantly, the room felt far more alive. It put the wilting dandelion that still adorned the windowsill to shame, but every piece of flora was valued equally in Haruka's eyes. They all did their job at painting even the coldest of spaces with a tinge of colour, at spreading warmth and happiness to every saddened soul. Though plants and flowers were an unneeded luxury, Haruka hoped a day would come where every house had at least one pot of singing peonies or thriving carnations.

Ren leaned on the table to study the hydrangeas and roses more closely, carefully brushing his finger over a petal to feel its softness. His twin usually loved flowers too, but her thoughts were still occupied with crowns and scepters.

"But wait," Ran said, connecting the faux dots in her head. "If I'm a princess and Makoto and Ren are princes, does that mean Mom and Dad are the king and queen?"

Her father laughed merrily at that flawless logic as he sat in his chair, but his wife smiled sheepishly.

"I don't think that's how it works, sweetie."

""But wait," Ran said, connecting the faux dots in her head. "If I'm a princess and Makoto and Ren are princes, does that mean Mom and Dad are the king and queen?"

Her father laughed merrily at that flawless logic as he sat in his chair, but his wife smiled sheepishly.

"I don't think that's how it works, sweetie."
"Well, maybe it does," Mr. Tachibana objected, and there was nothing but mischief glimmering behind his frameless spectacles. "You have always been my queen."

"Dear-" Mrs. Tachibana tried, torn between scolding him for teasing their children and being flustered by his flirtatious comment, but her daughter cut her off before she could decide.

"Right?"

Though he hoped to become a real member of this family in the near future, this was a matter Haruka was not going to involve himself in. He glanced at Makoto, amusement playing at his lips, but instead of his usual smile, he was met with a serious look. Flowers, status, it was all nice, but there were more important things Makoto needed to address.

"Ran, Ren, listen," he said, raising his voice to drown out their ruckus, "You cannot tell anyone about this, okay? Not your friends, not your teacher, not even Mrs. Tamura."

"What?"

"Why not?" Ren asked with a frown, "If you and Haru are getting married, then everyone should know about it, right?"

"Not yet," Makoto said with a shake of his head. "Because Haru is a prince, it's not the same as when ordinary people like us get married. It has to be a secret for now, just like how I told you you couldn't let anyone know who Haru really is."

That was the first Haruka heard of this. Everywhere they went, Makoto introduced him as his friend from out of town, which wasn't a lie per se. But he hadn't even thought about how Ran and Ren experienced his visit. They seemed to be rather chatty, like they'd tell their tales to any ear that crossed their path, so they easily could have blown his cover. They were only children and couldn't be held accountable if they slipped up in their enthusiasm and spilled the truth about his identity like a mug of freshly-poured milk. But thankfully, they seemed to have taken their brother's words to heart.

"When can we tell our friends, then?" Ran wondered, understanding but impatient.

Somehow, the fact she was forced to keep her mouth shut about something that excited her so made Haruka feel a bit guilty. The last thing he expected to happen when he came here was to involve two kids in their plight and censor their free spirits, and he wanted to make it up to them. After all, they hadn't asked for any of this; they were merely victims of circumstance.

"I… don't know yet," Makoto admitted with a sigh, plopping down in his chair like his legs couldn't support his weight any longer. "It depends on what Haruka's family will do. Things like this are a lot more complicated in royal families, especially when a commoner like me is involved."

"Wait," Ren said and all the colour drained from his face when he realised what their current situation actually entailed. "If you're going to marry Haru, will you go live with him in the palace, in Iwatobi?"

"Well, yes but-"

"So you're going to leave us?"

That blunt statement dipped in despair stabbed Makoto right in his soul and his eyes grew large. He didn't even get the chance to stumble a response before Ran spoke.
"What?" Her jaw dropped. The flame of fervor inside her pupils was doused instantly and her dreams crushed when reality struck her like lightning. "No! You wouldn't leave us, would you? You said you would never leave us!"

Within a split second, her light voice morphed from bewildered to furious. She sounded like pure thunder disrupting the calm heavens as she barked reproaches, and Haruka could see Makoto's heart shatter at the bile she spat at him, a concoction of anger and hurt. Tears sprang to her eyes to match the ones that burned in Ren's, but unlike his, it wasn't clear whether they were beckoned by grief or rage.

There was no denying it; Makoto had said he would never leave them and yet in less than twenty-four hours, he was setting foot in a coach to Iwatobi, unsure whether or not he would return.

With his effort in comforting his siblings, he ensnared himself in a sticky web and Haruka dearly wished he could have freed Makoto from it, that he could've aided him through this tough conversation. But even if he'd had his way with words, he shouldn't involve himself in this. Having grown up an only child, Makoto's bond with the twins was something he couldn't fathom. The opinion of an outsider had no place in something so personal, not when they could never understand it anyway.

"Ran, Ren," Makoto whimpered, and Haruka could almost hear his thick tears being swallowed so his siblings wouldn't see them fall. "I might be going with Haru, but that doesn't mean I'm leaving you. I love you way too much to leave you."

"But how can you go without leaving us?" Ren asked with an unsuccessful sniff: a single teardrop rolled over his chubby cheek, unable to stay at bay.

"Are we going with you?" Ran asked and her anger dissipated to make place for hope and confusion as she looked back at Haruka.

Although he wouldn't blame her if she had, Haruka was glad her disdain wasn't targeted at him, but rather at their circumstances. After all, he was the one stealing her brother away - which added another layer of guilt entirely - but he didn't mean to rip their family apart. Quite the opposite.

"We don't know yet," Makoto said - Haruka hated that he wasn't able to bid them more security. "Listen, as of right now, I don't know what's going to happen next. Tomorrow, I'll be going to Iwatobi with Haru and when we get there, we're going to have a talk with his parents. Until then, nothing is set in stone; we don't even know whether they'll accept me or not. But what I do know is that we will always be together, no matter what. If it's not in person, then forever in our hearts."

"But that's not enough," Ren protested and though he tried his hardest to bite it back, a small sob escaped his lips. "I need you here."

"Oh Ren," Makoto sighed, realising he hadn't worded that right, and he pulled his baby brother onto his lap to soothe him. "No matter what happens, even if I live in Iwatobi and you live in Sano, we'll definitely keep seeing each other. It won't be every day like it is now, but I promise I'll come back as often as I can because I need you too. Just like I need Ran, and Mom and Dad."

"Promise?" Ran said with a tiny pout, and when he saw it, Makoto lifted her onto his other knee.

"I promise," Makoto vowed, and Ren wrapped his arms around his neck to bury his face in his shoulder. He offered Ran a sweet smile as he ruffled her hair, and though she wasn't completely satisfied by his answers, she seemed appeased for now.
"And," Mr. Tachibana said in an attempt to elevate their mood, "If Makoto is too busy to come, then maybe we can go visit him some time too."

At that, the twins' faces whipped up, spark ignited by wonder. "At the palace?"

"Yes," their father confirmed, "If Haruka is alright with that, of course."

"Haru!"

"Can we?"

Their irises were shining, like they already envisioned themselves strutting through the vast hallways in fancy suits and dresses, eating lavish meals and sleeping in an enormous bed all by themselves. When met with those faces, Haruka couldn't have refused even if he had wanted to.

"Of course," he said, and his lips curled up with a special kind of fondness he hadn't felt before, "You're always welcome."

"Yes!" the twins squealed, and their tear-stained cheeks and snotty noses were whisked away by huge grins.

"Now that that's settled," Mrs. Tachibana jumped in, "I think it's time for you to go to bed."

"But Mom-" the pleading began, but their mother was firm.

"It's already long past your bedtime. I said you could stay up until Makoto and Haruka came home, and if my eyes aren't fooling me, then they are here now. You have to get up early tomorrow for school."

"But we haven't even heard about their engagement yet!"

"Can't we skip school for once?"

"School is more important, you know that," Makoto chided, but his gaze didn't lose its softness.

"We will tell you about our engagement tomorrow, alright?"

"But aren't you going to Iwatobi tomorrow?" Ren asked, always observant.

"Tomorrow evening," Haruka said as he crouched down to their level, "So we'll tell you after you get home from school. There's still some leftover cake, so we can celebrate then. How does that sound?"

"Great!" the twins chimed, and the promise of that delicious chocolate cake was enough persuasion for them to listen to their mother.

"And hey, we might be leaving tomorrow, but it won't be a goodbye, okay?" Makoto said with a gentle smile, "We'll see each other again very soon."

"Okay."

With that, Makoto pressed a kiss to each of their cheeks and hugged them tightly to his chest.

"Goodnight, I love you."

"Night."

"Love you too."
To his surprise, the twins gave Haruka a hug too once they'd hopped off Makoto's lap. He couldn't help but smile at how warm and welcoming they were towards him even though he'd shaken their little worlds down to the core. He gladly hugged them back. Although he never had a particular affinity towards children, Ran and Ren were quickly conquering a place in his heart.

"Remember," Makoto said as he lifted his finger to his mouth, "this is our secret."

Simultaneously, the twins locked their lips with an imaginary key and threw it over their shoulders. They could babble on and on for hours, but they were reliable kids. No promise was broken intentionally, and if they did happen to spark some hearsay by accident, then they could count on their parents to control the damage and write it off as a simple rumour.

With last wishes of sweet dreams, the twins left to get ready for bed and their parents followed suit to tuck them in.

Now they were alone, Makoto got up to make some tea and invited Haruka to sit down instead. He wanted to offer his help but if he did, he'd only get another version of Makoto's 'you're the guest' reasoning so he stayed put.

"It's a shame you already promised the cake to the twins," Makoto muttered as he put the kettle on the stove, "I could definitely go for another slice right now."

"Eat it if you want. I can make the twins another cake tomorrow," Haruka said, a smirk teasing his lips. "Consider it their part of the dowry."

Makoto chuckled. "I shouldn't. I've already had so much cake lately, it's not healthy." He patted his stomach as if it had expanded enormously, but Haruka saw no difference to how it had looked the first time he let his eyes feast upon his beautiful form.

"Gaining a couple of pounds will do you no harm," he said with a shrug. Whether Makoto was plump or lanky didn't matter, for he was gorgeous regardless of his size, but Haruka would be glad to see the imprints hunger left on his body disappear. If chocolate cake would accomplish that, then Haruka would gladly bake him one every day.

"Oh, that reminds me!" Makoto hit his palm with his fist. "We have the goat cheese I told you about. We can eat some of that now."

The story in which Makoto acquired it had piqued his curiosity, but as his eyes landed on the kettle simmering on the stove, he hesitated. "Goat cheese and tea? That doesn't sound like a great combination."

"Everything is a great combination when it's all you have."

These mundane chats with Makoto never failed to punch him in the gut when he least expected them to. There was no malice or offense in Makoto's voice, he was simply stating a fact, yet to Haruka, it was a slap in the face of his ignorance. While he always felt like he could be himself around him, this was a sign he should think twice about what he said. The last thing he wanted was for Makoto to regard him as ungrateful or inconsiderate.

He used to think he was different from the snobbish noblemen and women surrounding him, but when met with someone as humble as Makoto, he realised how out of touch with the common folk he truly was.

Embarrassed, he was about to stutter an apology, but Makoto continued as if nothing had happened.
"Oh, but there's still some wine left, right?" he said, "Isn't that a thing, cheese and wine?"

It was but usually, the type of wine was selected based on what complemented the cheese. But there was no way he was going to say that now. While he was sure the wine he brought would be a more suitable partner to the goat cheese than tea regardless of what kind it was, it would surely taste like vinegar if he drank it now.

"Unless you were saving the wine for something else?"

"No, it's fine. But I've already drunk way too much wine tonight, and so have you," he quipped, yet he got up from his chair all the same. "Your parents might like some, though."

"Is that their part of the dowry?" Makoto shot back as Haruka rummaged through one of the baskets sat abandoned on the wooden floor next to the coat rack.

"Please." He bit his bottom lip to keep himself from grinning - when did Makoto get so witty? "You're worth more than half a bottle of cheap wine." When he realised how tactless that sounded, he quickly corrected, "Relatively cheap."

His worries were unnecessary, for Makoto didn't seem to be bothered in the slightest. "Anyway, if you don't want tea, then we also have water and milk, and I think some orange juice as well. I'm not sure if those are better combinations with goat cheese, though."

"Tea is fine," Haruka said as he put the bottle on the table. "While the water is boiling, shall I cut the cheese? You know how your last escapade with a knife ended."

"Are you going to keep reminding me of that forever?"

"Absolutely."

A chuckle rumbled through Makoto's chest and Haruka had to suppress a grin too, but Makoto wouldn't go down that easily. "I made us sandwiches the other day without injuring myself," he defended, though he laid out the cheese on a cutting board all the same.

"So you have a success rate of 50%?" Haruka questioned, raising an eyebrow as he accepted the knife.

A brief pause followed as Makoto pondered about a good comeback. "Alright, you win," he gave in with a sigh of defeat. "Just be careful. My clumsiness might've rubbed off on you."

"I think I'll be fine," Haruka said as he sank the knife into the cheese and cut off a small slice. "I've cooked the same food twice and maintained my 100% success rate."

"Fair enough."

Now he had claimed that Haruka had to be extra cautious; if he did cut himself, Makoto would taunt him about it for the rest of his life. But he worked with precision and concentration as he diced the cheese in bite-sized pieces, kept the blade a safe distance from his skin. He only cut up a small sliver of the cheese, though; the rest of the cheese could be used as a component for an entire meal rather than wasted on a second dessert.

"Is this enough?" he asked nonetheless.

Makoto glanced at the board before he nodded. "We can always cut some more later if we want to."
With that, Haruka carried the board to the table right as Makoto's parents entered the room.

"What's this?" Mrs. Tachibana asked when she saw the cheese platter and the wine bottle.

"Some cheese the Natsumes gave me," Makoto called over his shoulder, "I helped them catch a goat that broke free and they gave me a block of cheese as a thanks. I figured we could eat some of it now. Do you want wine or tea with it?"

"Wine?" Makoto's parents questioned in unison, and it surprised Haruka that that was the part they found unusual enough to comment on.

"We had some left over from dinner," he explained, and it was the first time he was talking to both of Makoto's parents that his shoulders relaxed and he didn't hold his breath, "It's yours if you want it."

"Oh, that's very sweet of you, but we don't really drink alcohol," Mrs. Tachibana said, but her husband didn't share her viewpoint.

"But honey, you're a queen so you should drink like one," he claimed, but before she had the chance to chastise him he said, "Besides, we have something to toast on!"

"We can toast with tea too," she thought "You can have wine if you like, but I prefer a warm cup of tea."

"I'd like to try some, yes. It's been ages since I last had wine. I believe it was on our wedding day," he recalled, and his wife snorted in recollection.

"Indeed, and you already didn't enjoy it back then."

"Nonsense!"

As requested, Makoto brought over an empty cup along with the tea and placed it in front of his dad. His mother rolled her eyes at her husband's persistence but didn't argue it further.

Yet when Haruka began to pour the wine, Mr. Tachibana halted him before half the cup was filled, like he had come to regret his boastful attitude the moment the drink materialised in front of him. He couldn't back down now, so he took a big swig of it. The instant the flavour spread through his mouth, he winced and coughed heavily.

"This is… a bit stronger than I remember."

"I told you so," Mrs. Tachibana said with a blank stare, but her husband was no quitter.

"I didn't say I didn't like it," he rebutted as he took another sip, and before he could erupt into another coughing fit, he quickly washed it down with a piece of cheese.

Though Mr. Tachibana's antics were amusing, Haruka decided to forgo the pleasantries. There was a lot they needed to discuss and he'd rather not postpone the inevitable. Like with his proposal to Makoto, he wanted to give the Tachibanas as much time as he could to process what he was about to tell them.

"I'm going to cut to the chase right away," he started and he wrapped his hands around his mug to ground himself, feeling the soothing warmth of the tea transfer to his palms. "We need to talk about your housing situation."
His formality caught Mr. and Mrs. Tachibana off guard and his words appeared to puzzle them; despite their poverty, they had been able to retain the roof over their heads up until now. Rather than leaving them to decipher what he meant, Haruka clarified.

"If everything goes smoothly, Makoto will be moving to Iwatobi. I can imagine that you'd miss him greatly, and that would be mutual, of course." He could feel his voice slipping into his strict, ceremonial tone and forced himself to loosen up. This was no official meeting with a czar of a neighbouring realm, and he shouldn't approach it as such. "I didn't want to say this in front of Ran and Ren before I discussed it with you, but if you want, you're welcome to move into the palace along with us, as a family."

Deafening silence followed, like he dropped a bomb onto the dinner table. Makoto's parents shared some looks, for they couldn't believe their ears and had to confirm they both heard him correctly. This was a lot for them to take in, therefore Haruka elaborated to give them a more concrete vision of what they could be diving into.

"A wing of the palace can be cleared out for you, so you'll all have your own bed and bathrooms. And if you want, I can even arrange for there to be a family room with a kitchen, so you'll have your own space within the palace, with or without servants."

The word 'palace' had already taken them by surprise, but Mr. and Mrs. Tachibana's eyes nearly rolled out of their sockets at the mention of servants. It was not a light change, moving from a teeny house in the middle of a bustling town to a luxurious castle where their every desire was at their fingertips. But before they had the chance to think about it, Haruka presented them with their second option, figuring he better lay out all the cards before they deliberated.

"If you wish to be close to Makoto, but don't want to live in the palace, we can arrange a house for you in a nearby city or village, wherever you'd like. You can continue your business there, or you can get an education to start a new job or business. If you don't want to do any of that and have an early retirement, that's fine too," Haruka said with a reassuring nod. Makoto's parents had worked themselves to the bone for over thirty years, so he could imagine that they wanted to spend the remaining half of their lives revelling in everything they had missed out on.

"Haruka," Mrs. Tachibana gasped, her mouth hanging agape as the world of opportunity opened up to her. That was all she said, like her vocabulary had been wiped clean and her vocal cords shrivelled up, and her husband was just as speechless.

"If you don't want to move to Iwatobi, then I understand that," Makoto said with a small smile, "I'd love to have you all so close, but I don't want you to feel obligated to move to a different kingdom for me."

"If you want to stay here in Sano, we'll try our best to visit you as often as we can, and you're welcome to come visit us anytime, too," Haruka added. Even if Makoto had already said that earlier, he didn't want there to be any misconceptions about it. "Regardless of what you decide to do, you will get all the financial support you need. The choice is yours."

"Woah," Mr. Tachibana mumbled under his breath as he rubbed his fingers over his temples to absorb this mesh of information.

"We've never really thought about moving to Iwatobi before and well, we're going to have to think about it," Mrs. Tachibana said, and she looked a bit apprehensive as she stirred her tea. "If it was just us, the choice wouldn't be too hard, but we have to think about what's best for Ran and Ren, too."
"Of course, you can think about it for as long as you'd like," Haruka said, "But if you eventually decide to move to Iwatobi, I can assign them the best tutors in the realm. Or, if you'd rather have them in an environment where they're surrounded by other children, then we'll select the best school to enroll them in. I know education isn't everything, but I'll do my best to make sure their needs are met as much as possible."

"They would have to leave their friends and our hometown behind and that would be hard for them, but it sounded to me like they'd be happy to live in the palace, to be treated like royalty," Makoto said with a fond huff.

"They were, but believe me, their awe will wear off eventually," Haruka said and he gnawed on the inside of his cheek as he tried to find the right words. "Don't get me wrong, I'm very fortunate to have all that I have, but living in a palace can be rather isolating. There aren't any children their age and it's not like we can play with them all the time, so they'd be by themselves for a large portion of the day. I can vouch for the fact that no amount of toys can fill up an empty room, and they can't exactly invite their friends over whenever they want either. I'm afraid they'd get lonely after a while, that they'll become homesick to the life they used to lead and regret coming along."

Admittedly, that wasn't the best way to try to convince Makoto's parents to come with them, but it was the truth that had to be spoken. He wanted to have them closeby for Makoto's sake, but not at the cost of their happiness.

"But I can't be the judge of that. They're your children, and you know what's best for them. You can take your time to think about it, and we'll respect whatever decision you make."

"Thank you, Haruka," Mr. Tachibana said, "We'll weigh down our options and see what's best for us as a family. We'll let you know as soon as we reach a decision."

A tiny smile stretched Haruka's cheeks and he nodded in response, but he had to disclaim. "But, you have to keep in mind that I can't guarantee anything yet. I'll do whatever I can, but there's a real risk that even if you decide to move to Iwatobi, our plans will be thwarted by my parents and you'll ultimately have to stay here. But if I can get them to agree to our marriage, then everything else will be an easy feat, including this."

"We're aware of that, but…" Mrs. Tachibana trailed off as she furrowed her thick eyebrows, and she seemed hesitant to ask it, but this too, was something that had to be discussed. "What will you do if your parents don't agree to your marriage?"

It was a very reasonable question, one Makoto had asked him too, yet its recurrence made him nervous nonetheless. He didn't want to think about what would happen if his parents opposed to his relationship with Makoto - the prospect terrified him - but it was a possible outcome he couldn't ignore. If it got to that point, he had to face the repercussions.

"Then I'll resign my title and leave Iwatobi," he stated, glancing over to Makoto for moral support. "If you're willing to have me here, then I'll do everything I can to contribute to your household."

"Of course, you're always welcome here!" Mrs. Tachibana assured, and her husband nodded vigorously in concurrence. "But…"

"With all due respect, Haruka," Mr. Tachibana continued from where his wife left off, "Have you truly thought about what that would mean? You'd be trading in everything you have for little to nothing- well, not nothing, but you know what I mean!" he defended when Makoto raised a sceptical eyebrow at his poor word-choice. "Are you sure this is something you want, that this would make you happy?"
"No," Haruka confessed. His heart hammered against his ribcage and his tongue fought to keep his
feelings inside, but no matter how much he struggled to, he had to speak them aloud. "But I do
know that following the plan my parents mapped out for me at birth will make me very unhappy.
To be frank, I'd rather risk everything I have and lose it all than spend the rest of my life dwelling
on the what-ifs and regretting that I didn't take the leap."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," Makoto said as he covered his hands with his and bid
him an encouraging smile. "For now, we're going to do everything we can to get your parents'
approval."

Naturally, Haruka's smile widened.

"In that case, we'll keep our fingers crossed," Mr. Tachibana said with a grin and he popped
another dice of cheese into his mouth.

"Thanks," Makoto said sincerely, his eyes falling shut with a habitual head-tilt, "Now, let's enjoy
our last night before we leave."

"I'll drink to that!"

"Oh but Makoto, you can't go to Iwatobi like that!" his mother blurted, startling everyone at the
table.

"What? What do you mean?" Makoto asked with a frown.

"Your clothes! You can't meet with a king and queen looking like that, you have to look your very
best!"

"This is my very best. I don't have much else, you know that."

"Then we have to get you something else!" she insisted as she leapt from her chair.

"What, right now?!"

"Of course! You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?"

"But we can't go bother the Matsuokas at this hour!"

"Nonsense! Miyako is a night owl, and considering Sousuke is still there, I'm sure they're all
awake."

Sousuke. Haruka had completely forgotten about his guard's existence.

Since they were practically the same size, Haruka could order him to lend Makoto some clothes,
but he didn't want to do that. Makoto had already borrowed Kisumi's suits for a while, and he
deserved to have some nice ones for himself. Ones he didn't have to ask anyone for, ones tailored
to fit his body and no one else's.

The protests were forming on Makoto's lips, but Haruka cut him off. "Your mother is right. My
parents are very sensitive to things like appearance and personal hygiene. Different clothes will
increase our chances, even by just a little."

In his humble opinion, Makoto always looked his very best regardless of his garbs, but he knew his
parents wouldn't share that opinion. They were materialistic and judgemental, and even if Makoto
wouldn't be the one doing the talking, he was sure his parents would be swayed more easily if
Makoto’s looks were up to their standards: neat and representable, like a prince.

Makoto’s mouth hung open in an onset of resistance, but the unwavering gazes directed at him made him sigh. "Alright. But what about Ran and Ren?"

"I'll stay with them," his father said, "I don't know anything about fashion anyway, and besides, I still have some unfinished business I need to attend to." He took another bite of cheese and chewed fervently.

Now that was out of the way, there was one more thing before they could go. Although the Tachibanas seemed to be on good terms with the Matsuokas, it was still rude to stop by their shop at this time of night, unannounced and unexpected. That was not to mention all the last-minute work they would be doused in. The least Haruka could do was bring a gift.

He glanced around the room to see if there was anything suited to be a present. He couldn't give them the block of cheese - or what remained of it - as that was a reward Makoto had worked for and something the Tachibanas could utilise themselves, and he certainly wasn't about to hand out Makoto’s engagement bouquet, for it held too much meaning. That only left the bottle of wine; while half a bottle wasn't much, it was better than nothing and Mr. Tachibana probably had his fill of it already.

Nevertheless, he asked, "Do you want some more wine, sir?"

"No no, I've had plenty, thank you," Mr. Tachibana said with another cough of attempted nonchalance. "You can have the rest."

"Thank you." He grabbed the bottleneck as he got to his feet. "I thought I could bring it along, as a gesture of gratitude."

"Oh, Miyako loves wine so this will be a treat for her." Mrs. Tachibana clasped her hands together in delight. "Now then, let's make haste."

"Try not to stay out too late," her husband said as she leaned down to peck his cheek.

"I'll try. I'm not sure how long it will take, so don't wait up for me."

"Alright. Have fun!"

With muttered goodnights and a last wave over their shoulders, they closed the door behind them and began their journey to Matsuoka's Fitted Garments.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed it!

The next chapter should be out on Rin’s birthday (February 2nd). It might seem like a long wait considering the chapter's already fully written, but the end of the year's a busy time for everyone and I hope that, with this headstart, I can stay on track to finish this fic in 2020; I can't promise anything yet, but that's my goal. Besides, if there's any chapter fit to be posted on Rin's birthday, it's the next one.

In the meanwhile, you can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr @DatHeetJoella for
more MakoHaru content in-between fic updates. I often share snippets and other stuff regarding my fics on there, as well as other MakoHaru things.

For now, I wish you all an amazing end of the year. Happy holidays and I hope to see you again in 2020! :)

Haruka, Makoto and his mother arrived at Matsuoka's Fitted Garments to ask for their help, but not every member of the Matsuoka family was equally as willing to lend a hand.

Mrs. Tachibana announced their presence with three knocks on the glass of the firm wooden door, the sign that hung behind it having been flipped to 'closed' hours ago. In desperate times, such signs had no authority.

A couple of seconds passed before the shop's lights were turned on and Gou appeared behind the glass. She opened the door with a cheerful grin. "Hi! Come to pick up Sousuke?"

"Actually, we're here to-" Mrs. Tachibana started, but she was cut off by a whirlwind of pent-up emotion.

"Gou, how many times do I have to tell you not to open the door when it's dark out!"

For some inexplicable reason, every time Haruka had the displeasure of encountering Rin Matsuoka, he was angry about one thing or another and wasn't afraid to vocalise it. His face was scrunched up to show shark-like teeth Haruka somehow hadn't noticed before, red eyes piercing as they wandered from his little sister to the uninvited guests who spoiled his night with their unwanted arrival. His expression softened when he saw Mrs. Tachibana and Makoto standing at the doorstep, but the annoyance returned in full force when he looked at Haruka. Needless to say, that feeling was entirely mutual.

"It's fine," Gou brushed off, gesticulating like she was physically swatting his concerns away. "It's only the Tachibanas."
"Sorry to bother you this late, but we have a favour to ask," Mrs. Tachibana said with a sheepish smile. "Could we maybe come inside?"

"Of course!" Gou immediately stepped aside to let them in.

Rin stayed at the door, and Haruka could feel his stare burning on his back as he walked past him. Despite Sousuke's 'apologies', his grudge against him apparently lingered. Not that Haruka had any regrets about the conflict that occurred during their first meeting; he hadn't done anything wrong and he'd do it again in a heartbeat. Rin might have known Makoto for longer than him, but that gave him no right to lay his hands on him and speak to him that way. He had to know his place.

Ignoring the mental daggers that were aimed at him, Haruka followed closely behind Makoto as they entered the medium-sized shop that was illuminated by two large chandeliers dangling from the ceiling.

In the center of the room was a small, round platform similar to the one his tailors always carried along. A couple of comfortable-looking armchairs and a sofa were placed in front of it to ensure a pleasant experience for their patrons while they were getting their measurements taken.

For those nude but less wealthy, clothing racks with various pre-made garments were built into the walls, accompanied by a fitting room to try on said garments before purchase. An ornate mirror was perched up in the corner to admire their style and fit.

Displayed in front of the windows, framed by draped red curtains, were a handful of mannequins, their faceless forms focused on the abyss of the alleyway ahead. The clothes they showed off were nothing special to Haruka - his parents would fire their tailors on the spot if they even considered bringing them into their palace - but for commoners, they were rather nice. Credit was given where it was due, and judging by the refinements visible at first glance, the Matsuokas were gifted in their craft.

The part of this shop that stood out to Haruka the most, though, was the prominent portrait adorning one of the walls. It appeared to have been a rather cheap one, for chips of paint had flaked off over the years, yet that didn't make it any less treasured. Haruka had never met the depicted man, but with the Matsuoka family's history in mind, it was obvious who he was.

That, and the sharp teeth that sent chills down Haruka's spine were identical to Rin's.

"Where's your mother?" Mrs. Tachibana asked, and in response, Gou pointed towards the back room, where the glint of light they saw from the outside originated.

Once Mrs. Tachibana had disappeared behind the door, Rin turned to him. "So, what are you doing here?" he said, and the unconcealed distaste in his voice made it sound more like an accusation than a question.

"Requesting your services," Haruka stated as he straightened his back, trying his best to appear aloof. Such shallow attempts at intimidation couldn't faze him, not when he'd been exposed to verbal aggression masked by façades of composedness since he was an infant.

"Didn't you see the sign? We're closed," Rin snarled with a raise of his pointy eyebrow. "Come back tomorrow."

"We can't. My fiancé and I are leaving tomorrow evening, and we need his suit to be finished before then," Haruka said, and he had to bite his lip to keep himself from smirking at the dumbfounded look on Rin's face.
"Fi… Fiancé?!"

Contrary to her brother, Gou gasped as her eyes grew big with excitement. "You're engaged? Congratulations!" She jumped to wrap her arms around Makoto's broad frame and tugged him down to her level rather awkwardly, coaxing a chuckle out of him.

"Yes. Haru asked me earlier tonight and well, I said yes," he explained with a bashful smile as he gently patted her back.

"That's great! I'm so happy for you two!" Gou said, squeezing Makoto one more time before she released him in favour of capturing Haruka in a suffocating embrace as well.

The wine bottle was nearly knocked from his grip so surprised was he by her chosen manner of felicitation. Whether it was common here in Sano specifically or for all common folk, Haruka didn't know, and while he appreciated the sentiment it expressed, he wasn't quite used to casual physical contact yet. In fact, he didn't think he'd ever get used to it. Unless the person instigating these embraces was Makoto, of course. Then he'd gladly oblige.

Thankfully, Gou's hug didn't linger like Nagisa's did, and she pulled back after a few seconds. "So, what happened? I want to know all the details!"

"Well..." Makoto started as he rubbed at his neck, skin dusted like the sunset under which his story took place, "Haru was waiting for me at the town square on a picnic blanket, with wine and candles and a home-cooked dinner. After we finished eating, he asked if I wanted to go back to Iwatobi with him, if I wanted to marry him. And I said yes."

The softness of Makoto's voice as he spoke of his proposal made Haruka's insides melt. It was a sweet moment with streaks of bitterness and doubt, yet it was Haruka's most precious memory to date. And the future ahead would only deliver him ones even more cherished.

"Oh, how romantic," Gou mused, clutching at her chest as if her heart couldn't bear it. "Do you have a ring too?"

"Of course," Makoto said and he held out his hand to Gou, who grasped his fingers and twisted them to watch the light dance across the gold band.

"Wow, it's beautiful!"

"My father made it," he couldn't help but disclose, and his pride towards his father's work affirmed Haruka had made the right choice asking Mr. Tachibana. "But that's not all. Haru also gave me this big bouquet of flowers, with roses and hydrangeas and orange blossoms."

"He's really been spoiling you, huh?" she said, nudging him playfully with her elbow, and then she sighed dreamily. "I hope I can find someone like him one day, too."

"I sincerely hope you don't," Rin, who had seemingly recovered from Haruka's blow, punched back.

"At least she'll definitely find someone who's better than you," Haruka said without a blink or a stutter. Rin might've had the abrasiveness he lacked, but Haruka was schooled in fast thinking and debating and was expected to be quick with his retorts. If this was a war, Rin possessed a bulky cannon while he had a bow to shoot poison-tipped arrows with.

Rin's jaw plunged in a blend of shock and offense, once again flashing Haruka his horrendous teeth. "You…!"
"Guys," Makoto said before Rin could find a proper rebuttal, and he crossed his arms. "We're leaving tomorrow. Can't you be nice to each other for one night?"

The disappointed tone sent a surge of embarrassment through Haruka's veins and he averted his eyes. He was well aware he was acting childish, but Rin managed to tick him off with a mere glance, more than even the haughtiest of aristocrats could.

Still, he'd been pretending to like those people all his life, so perhaps he could tolerate Rin for one evening too. If that was what it took to be with Makoto, then it was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

"Here," he said and he held out the wine towards Rin.

"What's this?" Rin scoffed, yanking the bottle from Haruka's hand, "A peace offering?"

Or maybe, it was not.

"I don't recall doing anything that would require me to provide you with a peace offering." Haruka bit his tongue to keep himself from adding more fuel to the fire that seemed to be abiding inside Rin, and Makoto's words reverberated through his brain to remind him to stay collected. "It's for your mother. I thought it would be rude to stop by at this time of night without a present, and I heard she liked wine, so."

His elaboration didn't make Rin any less sceptical, and he analysed the bottle with a doubtful eye as though it contained swamp water instead of white wine. Then he scoffed again. "Only half a bottle? For a rich prince, you're very stingy."

"Rin," Makoto cut in before Haruka could reply, his voice laced with the same sternness he used when the twins were misbehaving. "Don't be like that. It was Haru's initiative to even bring something, and this was all we had left over from dinner."

Rin clicked his tongue at Makoto's reprimand, and despite his resolutions, Haruka couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"If you don't want it, I'll gladly take it back."

"I didn't say that!" Rin turned so the bottle was out of Haruka's reach, and then he stalked off like his shoes were filled with concrete. But when he stood in front of the door Mrs. Tachibana had passed through, he halted. Fingers clasped around the doorknob, he mumbled under his breath, "Thanks," and within a split second, the door clicked shut behind him and he was gone.

Finally, Haruka allowed his smirk to break through.

Gou coughed to clear her throat - and to will away the tense atmosphere Rin left in his wake - and then she said, "Anyway, you mentioned you need a suit?"

"Yes. I have to look my very best for when I meet the King and Queen, and apparently, this isn't it." He gestured towards his body or more precisely, to the simple clothing that covered it.

"Hm," Gou hummed in agreement as she ran her eyes over his form, over the smudges of soot in his shirt and the dirt-stains embedded in his trousers that no amount of washing could rid them of, "First impressions are very important after all."

"But I've already met them."
"But they haven't met you yet. They've only met 'Nagisa', so you should show them Makoto is just as classy."

"You're right, I probably should wear something nice when I admit I'm an imposter and therefore a criminal," Makoto said with an amused huff, "Then I'll at least look fancy when I get publicly executed."

Gou giggled at his remark and though Haruka could see the humour in it, the image it planted in his head was a highly upsetting one. Death sentences hadn't been carried out in Iwatobi in over a hundred years and he wasn't eager for that to be changed. Especially not when it came to the man he intended to spend the rest of his life with.

But Haruka didn't want to disrupt their friendly banter with his reservations. "Technically speaking, Rei is the prime suspect since he hired you, you're merely his accomplice. If anyone's getting executed, it would be him."

"Good point," Makoto said, rubbing his chin as if he was seriously considering it, "So instead, I'll look fancy for a lifetime in the dark dungeons."

There was nothing but teasing in Makoto's voice, but the mention of the dungeon brought a twinge of pain to Haruka's stomach. Whenever he thought about that night Makoto - and Kisumi - spent lying in a cold cell like a felon, guilt and shame flooded his senses. He wasn't the one who had ordered for him to be detained, but the guards were under his command therefore he was responsible for their actions. But Makoto didn't blame him for it; if anything he seemed to have left that terrible experience far behind him. Haruka hoped he would eventually be able to forget about it, too.

"Now then," Gou said to get back to the point, "what kind of suit are you looking for to flaunt in that dungeon?"

With a stiff smile, Makoto shrugged and looked over to Haruka. That was the moment Haruka realised that, like Makoto, he hadn't given it any thought either. He was no expert in fashion and the likes, quite the opposite. But he was the only one who knew what kind of garbs his parents approved of, what was up to their standards. While Makoto had only seen them, he put them on every morning and though Gou was the tailor in this equation, Haruka was not the average customer that strolled into this shop.

"Um, something like this?" he mumbled as he gestured towards his own suit.

Gou clenched her - perfectly normal - teeth as she studied the fabric and design of Haruka's coat. "We've never made something like this before. Royals are not exactly amongst our usual clientele."

"It doesn't have to be the same as this, but just to give you an idea," Haruka said quickly. If the Matsuokas refused, they wouldn't have a suit ready for tomorrow; he highly doubted the Tachibanas happened to be acquainted with another tailor, one who did have noblemen as their patrons. Let alone one on whose door they could knock this late at night.

Fortunately, Gou smiled. "We've never made something like this before, but I didn't say we weren't up for the challenge. It probably won't look quite as detailed as yours, for we simply don't have those types of patterns and buttons to our disposal, but we can try."

Simultaneously, Makoto and Haruka let out a deep breath.

"Thank you," Makoto said with a slight bow, and Haruka followed his example.
"It's fine, it's fine," Gou said with another motion of her hand, "Come, and I'll go make a sketch."

Finally, she escorted them through the door too and revealed that directly behind the shop was their tailor's atelier. Compared to the neat and tidy shop, this place was in absolute mayhem.

Rolls of various coloured fabrics bulged from a storage shelf, spilling out over a large table that stood in the middle of the room. Amid the mess of pins and papers and bobbins were three sewing machines, two of which had pieces of cloth stuck between the needle. And a handful of mannequin torsos were strewn around the room, some of which showcased a complete shirt, others held onto works-in-progress.

In the corner of the room, away from the explosion of thread, was a small kitchenette and a round table for breaks throughout the day. An iron, spiral staircase led up to darkness, presumably to the Matsuokas living quarters.

Sat at the table like a true knight was Sousuke, sipping from a dainty porcelain teacup dwarfed by his enormous hands. When their eyes met, he nodded to Haruka in an acknowledgement of his presence. Haruka did the same. Not a single word was exchanged, and that was how Haruka preferred it.

But Sousuke was not alone. Beside him stood Mrs. Tachibana, who was talking with a woman Haruka hadn't met before. Deep burgundy locks cascaded over one of her shoulders like a waterfall of wine, her pearlescent complexion betrayed she spent most of her time between these walls, irises a vibrant red like her children's. But as far as Haruka could tell, only her daughter had been blessed enough to inherit her teeth.

When her gaze fell on him, her face lit up with wonder and she abruptly interrupted her conversation with Mrs. Tachibana to walk over to him.

"Prince Haruka," she greeted with a kind smile, "Your Highness, I've heard so much about you. It's an honour to finally meet you in person."

Whenever someone said that, the hairs at the back of his neck stood up straight like a current of electricity shocked his body. Being who he was, people talking about him was inevitable but when confronted with it this directly, nausea coiled in his stomach, threatening to crawl up his throat. It had been his reality for all his life, but he couldn't remember a time he hadn't wanted to merge into the background like an ordinary person. That was a luxury he could trade no amount of gold for.

Still, Mrs. Matsuoka seemed nothing but welcoming, like the tales she heard were solely good ones - which was plausible, considering Makoto had been the one to inform her of their adventure. The bile Rin assumably spat about him appeared to have been taken with a grain of salt.

"Please, Mrs. Matsuoka, the honour is mine," Haruka returned, bowing to her. "My apologies for our unforeseen arrival, but-"

"It's alright," Mrs. Matsuoka cut him off, "I already know all the details. You need a suit, hm? We can do that."

"Thank you, madam," Haruka said, but before he could say more, he felt something tickling his leg. Startled, he whipped his head down and was met with a rather plump cat rubbing its head against his shins and circling his feet.

"Hi Steve," Makoto said as he crouched down and held out his hand towards the cat, who immediately flocked to him like a king to an ermine coat, or like Haruka would to a piece of grilled...
"Steve?" Haruka questioned at the unusual name; he'd never heard anything quite like it before and it felt foreign on his tongue.

"Yes," Gou affirmed as she knelt down to Steve's level too. "Makoto found him as a kitten during an errand a couple of years ago and brought him to us. He was so tiny and cute and he looked very malnourished, so we decided to keep him and he's been with us ever since. Rin immediately fell in love with him and called him Steve, after a character from one of his favourite books. Unfortunately, the love was not mutual."

Gou's comment earned her a scowl from her older brother, which only made her grin. The corners of Haruka's lips twitched up too and he had to bite his cheek to suppress it.

Wanting to try his luck, he offered his own hand to Steve, who purred as he revelled in a twenty-fingered full-body massage. When he opened his eyes and saw Haruka's hand, his ears shot up and he inched closer to him. After a pause to examine Haruka's scent, he rubbed his head against his knuckles, granting him permission to pet him. Victory had rarely felt so sweet.

"Aw, he likes you," Makoto cooed when Haruka stroked Steve's rotund back - his days of malnourishment had clearly been left long behind him.

This time, Haruka couldn't hold back his smile. A special kind of tenderness resided in Makoto's gaze, the kind he wanted to capture on a canvas to admire for the rest of his days. If it was a cat that evoked this fondness in him, then Haruka was adamant. Whether his parents disliked pets or not, they were going to adopt a cat in the foreseeable future.

"Well then, let's get to work," Mrs. Matsuoka announced as she clapped her hands, "We've got a lot of work ahead of us, and the clock is ticking."

"I'll go make a few sketches!" Gou said, magicking a pencil and a blank book from the mess on the table. "What exactly are you looking for?"

"A coat, undershirt and some trousers will suffice," Haruka said.

"I see. Sorry to ask, but could I maybe borrow your jacket?" She twirled the pencil between her nimble fingers. "So I have some reference material."

The question caught him a bit off guard, but he began to undo his buttons all the same. Even in the pleasantly warm shop, he felt somewhat cold in just his undershirt, nude almost. Nevertheless, he handed over his coat like Gou requested.

"Thanks." She carefully hung it over one of the empty mannequins and immediately got to work.

"Rin, can you go take Makoto's measurements, please?" Mrs. Matsuoka continued, "Then we can pick out the fabric."

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Sousuke's deep voice suddenly sounded, and it baffled Haruka; he'd almost forgotten he was still here.

"Can you keep an eye on Steve? You know how much he loves chasing the spools and I don't want him to get any of his hair on the fabric."

Diligently Sousuke scooped Steve up in his arms, who instantly nuzzled his face against his chest. He obeyed the order so effortlessly it was almost like he was in service of the Matsuokas instead of mackerel.
Haruka's family; he must've been in over his head if he was this desperate to leave a good impression on Rin's mother.

While Sousuke carried Steve back to the table, Makoto and Rin left the room with a notebook and a tape measure in hand, and Mrs. Matsuoka led him over to the piles upon piles of fabric on the shelf.

"Please select whatever fabrics you'd like," Mrs. Matsuoka said, but that was simpler in theory than in practice; they had such a large assortment to choose from Haruka didn't know where to start.

There were mostly neutrals, varying shades of brown, beige and white, but there were also some more unusual alternatives. From fabrics with strange motifs and odd textures to fabrics in all the colours of the rainbow, this shop had it all. It wasn't like he'd had a specific vision in mind when he came here and the wide range of options overwhelmed him.

Apparently, it showed on his face, for Mrs. Tachibana pulled out a clear, dark violet. "What about something like this for the jacket?"

The first time he laid eyes upon Makoto, he'd been wearing a purple coat too, though the shade had been very different. As opposed to this rich, royal purple, that coat was a warmer, more vibrant purple, leaning towards pink rather than blue. Regardless, Makoto had looked amazing and he was certain he would look stunning in a suit made from this fabric too - purple was great at bringing out the greenness of his gorgeous eyes. But for some reason, it didn't feel quite right.

"It's nice-" Haruka started, but before he could ease into his rejection, Mrs. Matsuoka took the roll from Mrs. Tachibana and put it back on the shelf.

"That's a no, then," she said with a supportive wink, "We're not going for nice, we're going for perfect."

Haruka nodded. Though perfection wasn't the most achievable of goals, it was going to be a success this time. Makoto just had that power over him.

"Then, what about this?" Mrs. Matsuoka continued as she pointed at a bright crimson. "Red looks great on everyone."

That was subjective, for Haruka could tell with a mere glance that this wasn't it. It was a very nice colour, but it wasn't for Makoto. A coat in this shade would scream to announce its presence in every room it entered, and that wasn't what Makoto was like. His natural charm and exceptional beauty drew everyone's stares to him subtly, in a way that was captivating but not urging. What Makoto needed wasn't a coat that demanded attention, but one that enhanced his pure look, one that complemented his face as well as his body. One that deserved to be worn by him.

Then, his eye suddenly fell on it. A velvety dark green fabric lied at the top of the shelf, the roll thick like it had rarely been touched. When he saw it, he was transported back home.

To the queen's study and all the winters he'd spent lying on the rug in front of the fireplace, reading books underneath his grandmother's watchful eye as the warmth of the flames caressed his cheeks. To the peppermint tea he'd drink with her as she told him stories beyond written words and the butter cookies they ate against his parents' wishes. To the snow-covered pine trees, the sole dash of green that prevailed in the desolate gardens, visible behind fogged-up windows and spreading their liveliness to him.

"What do you think of that one?" Haruka said as he got up on his toes, but the fabric remained
outside of his reach.

Following the line of his finger, Mrs. Matsuoka fetched a stepping stool to retrieve the roll.

"The green one?" Mrs. Tachibana asked in surprise when Mrs. Matsuoka brought it down, and Haruka nodded again. "It's a lovely colour but... isn't it more suited for the winter?"

From a tailor's point of view, she was probably right. But Haruka didn't think there were colours assigned to seasons, and if there were, then a winter colour would be marvelous for Makoto. While his smile was radiant like the summer sun, it was also warm and comforting like a fireplace on a frigid winter's night. Paired with his tanned skin and his honey-brown locks, a suit in this fabric would encompass all elements of his being; someone who was not a seasonal treat, but a lifelong delight.

The fact that green was his mother's favourite colour could work to their advantage as well.

"I could see it work in the summer too," Mrs. Matsuoka thought. "The colour is rather dark, but that doesn't mean the coat has to be if it's combined with something light like this..."

She scaled the stool once more to grab one of the neutrals. An ivory, to be exact. She roughly shoved the mess on the table aside and dropped the rolls on it, laying out the fabrics so they overlapped. Admittedly, it was a good combination and suddenly, the vision he lacked before appeared in front of him very vividly. Mrs. Matsuoka had a true eye for colour.

"We can make the cuffs out of this fabric and have the trousers and undershirt match; that alleviates the colour scheme. Add some gold details around the collar and buttons, and it's complete!"

A pause followed and Mrs. Matsuoka looked at him expectantly. When he realised he hadn't said anything yet, he stumbled, "It's great, thank you."

"Great!" she echoed, and then she turned to her daughter, "How are those sketches coming along?"

"Almost done," Gou replied, not taking her eyes off the page. After a minute or two, she turned around and put her book on the table for everyone to see. "What do you think?"

Given her inexperience with this type of style and the time span she had to work with, the sketches were rather impressive. She'd drawn a simplified version of Haruka's coat both from the front and the back, as well as close-ups of some of the finer details. It looked like something his own tailors could have created; every aspect was up to par. The undershirt was very plain, but it should be. No need to make something excessively intricate that no one would see anyway.

The trousers, however, were not exactly what he'd had in mind. On her images they seemed pretty wide from the thighs to the ankles, like the trousers of commoners. Which wasn't odd, considering that was where her expertise lied and unlike with the coat, she didn't have a direct reference to go by.

Nevertheless, it was obvious Gou was a talented artist, at least when it came to designs and fashion.

"The coat looks good, thank you. But," Haruka mumbled, hesitant to ask, "Can I make some minor tweaks to the trousers?"

"Sure!"
Gou passed him the pencil and Haruka pulled the page closer. "I thought the trousers could be a bit more narrow, so they follow the curve of his legs," he explained as he drew a tighter, more form-fitted pair, "that way, it accentuates his shape more and then he can wear his boots over them, which gives it a cleaner look."

"Ah, you're right," she mused, "then it also fits with the jacket more."

"Yes. I also thought you could add a stripe of the green along the side like this," Haruka said, sketching out a side view so he could show what he meant. "and perhaps with a thin line of gold on either side of it too. Then the coat and trousers are truly a set rather than two individual garments. Is that possible?"

"Of course," Mrs. Matsuoka affirmed with a steadfast grin, "The customer is king. Or, I suppose in this case, prince. We can definitely make this happen."

He was starting to sound like an orchestra playing the same piece over and over, but he still said, "Thank you."

"I must say, your drawing looks really good," Gou commented as she ran her fingers over the hastily drawn graphite strokes. "Do you do stuff like this more often?"

"Sometimes."

"From what I've heard, Haruka is a very gifted painter," Mrs. Tachibana said with a smile so prideful it was like she was boasting about her own child, "Back in Iwatobi, he made this beautiful painting of Makoto."

It appeared that Makoto had forgone those details when relaying their tale to the Matsuokas, for Gou gasped in awe. "Really?"

"It's nothing," he brushed off and he put the pencil back on the hardwood table like it had pricked his fingertips. "Just a hobby."

He thought that would be the end of it because that was all there was to say about it. Alas, it brought Gou to a whole other topic he was not eager to discuss.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask you ever since I heard about what happened," she said, folding her fingers and resting her chin on them, a spark of inquisitiveness in her fiery irises. "Why Makoto?"

A frown knitted his eyebrows. "Why Makoto, what?"

"What do you see in him?" she clarified, "I mean, I have functioning eyes so I can tell what you see in him physically, and he's also one of the sweetest guys I've ever met; he's pretty much the total package. So I get it completely, but I'm still curious. You're a prince, you could pick anyone in the entire world, while he's just a commoner. Why him?"

That was the most absurd question in the history of time. Of course it would be him. Not only was he the most beautiful person to ever scrape the surface of the planet, his soul matched that outer beauty. He was kind and compassionate and smart, so genuine Haruka could never find words to describe him with that would do him justice.

It was his determination to swim despite his fear of the water. His generosity and humbleness despite his lack of resources. His willingness to make sacrifices for those he loved despite his own dreams and wishes. It was the way he cut his fingers while cooking, how he stepped on his toes a
hundred times when they danced together, how his eyes lit up with glee when he stuffed his face with chocolate cake, how his melodic voice grew soft when he spoke his thoughts.

But most of all, it were the feelings he gave Haruka. How youthful and carefree he felt when they laughed together at a silly remark, things he hadn't felt since he was a boy. How he felt like he could conquer the world as long as Makoto looked at him with the gaze that made his stomach flutter. How a brush of his fingertips against his skin sent tingles down his spine and how his embrace engulfed him in security and bliss. How his presence never failed to bring happiness to everyone around him, but to Haruka especially.

There were countless of reasons to adore Makoto Tachibana. Everyone acted like Makoto was so lucky that he, a commoner, had been able to earn the affections of a prince. But truly, Haruka was the lucky one in their relationship.

Princes. Commoners. Neither of those terms held meaning in the language of love.

However, there was no way he could get that past his lips. He wouldn't want to say it even if he could; he highly doubted he'd be able to voice his feelings to Makoto this directly, let alone to his soon-to-be mother-in-law and two tailors he barely knew - and his guard, who practically blended in with the wallpaper at that point.

Underneath their scrutinising stares, blood rushed to his cheeks and his eyes developed a sudden interest in his nail beds. With the many debates he had been forced to participate in, he never would have guessed it would be an inquiry of his feelings that would leave him gaping like a mackerel.

"Not a talker, huh?" Gou said at his lingering silence. "That's okay. Sorry if I overstepped your boundaries. It wasn't my intention to make you uncomfortable."

"No, it's alright," Haruka said, for while her question had left him a bit abashed, he didn't want her to feel apologetic when she didn't ask it in ill will. "It's just… he's… very special."

Gou smiled, satisfied by that answer. Then, she placed her small hand over his and peered right into his soul. "He really is special, so please. Take good care of him."

"I will," Haruka vowed. Knowing there were so many people looking out for Makoto, people who cared about him, rested Haruka's heart with ease. He wouldn't let them down.

She patted the back of his hand once more before she let go. "We have to wait until Rin finishes taking Makoto's measurements," she said as she got up from her chair, "so in the meantime, let's pick out the buttons for the jacket."

Out of the shelf beside the fabric she took a large case and put it on the table. The buttons were divided into separate compartments, sorted on size and type. The majority were rather basic, serving solely to tie two ends of a garment together, but there were also a handful of more ornate ones. Alas, no buttons were embedded with Iwatobi's crest - or even Sano's crest, for that matter - so the decision landed on medium-sized brass buttons embellished with a fleur de lis. If he could've designed custom buttons like he could trousers, they wouldn't have been his first choice, but he trusted the Matsuokas to make it work.

That was the final element needed to complete the suit; all that was left were Makoto's measurements before their vision could be brought to life with needle and thread. But the minutes passed, eating away at their precious time and there was still no sight of Rin nor Makoto.
With a deep sigh, Mrs. Matsuoka dug through her skirt in search of her pocket watch and as she saw the seconds tick by, she scowled. "Why is he taking this long? Surely he should've been done by now."

"I'll go take a look," Haruka offered, wanting to feel useful somehow.

"Thanks."

He gently closed the door behind himself, but when he turned around, Makoto wasn't standing on the platform and Rin wasn't jotting down the circumference of his waistline either. Upon the glass side table that stood next to the sofa laid an open book, a pencil against its spine and the tape measure covering up the writing. When he lifted it, the numbers corresponding to parts of Makoto's body were already written in the book. A sting of panic shot through his chest.

Frantically he looked around himself and then, he spotted the silhouettes of two heads through the shop's large window. With that, the weight fell off his shoulders and he walked over to the open door. He peered around the corner and saw Makoto and Rin seated on the pavement, their forms illuminated by the chandeliers as well as the street lights.

Leaning against the doorpost, Haruka wanted to call out to them, but he swallowed his words when a voice pierced the night.

"I know we're not exactly friends, but I care about you, Makoto. Look, if it's money you need-"

"Rin," Makoto interrupted, "Thank you. You and Gou are the closest thing I've ever had to friends in this town, and I care about you too. But I don't need money - well, we do need money, but that's not why I'm doing this. That's not what this is about. I mean, it was at first, but that was before I met him. I like him, Rin. I really do."

Haruka's stomach jumped up to his throat when he realised they were talking about him. He didn't mean to breach their privacy by listening in on their conversation, but his feet were glued to the fluffy doormat, fingernails marking the soft wood of the jambs.

"I know you do but… Are you sure he likes you too? You're always so naïve when it comes to these things, I don't want him to take advantage of you."

"How would he take advantage of me? By offering me a stable life?"

"I don't know, but…"

"Why would he go through all this effort, to defy his parents and risk everything he has if he didn't genuinely care about me? For me, there are only benefits to our relationship but for him, there are only hardships. Wouldn't I be the one taking advantage of him in this situation?"

"You would never do that," Rin argued vehemently, "You're too damn kind to ever consider it!"

"But he doesn't know that, does he?" Makoto said and though his back was turned to him, Haruka could hear the smile in his voice. "We've only known each other for a week and for a large portion of that time, I was lying to his face. For all he knows, I could still be lying to him now, acting like I have feelings for him when in reality, it's his riches that I'm after. But even after everything that has happened, he trusts me and he's willing to put his whole world on the line for me. Is it really fair to question his intentions when he's been nothing but honest with me?"

"You're right," Rin mumbled under his breath like he was chewing a dagger, and he turned his head away from Makoto. "I just don't want you to get hurt."
In response, Makoto put his hand on Rin's shoulder. "I appreciate that," he said sincerely, "but I will get hurt at some point. We all get hurt sometimes, that's what life is like. But I know that when I do get hurt, it won't be because of Haru. If anything, I'm more afraid that I'm going to hurt him again. I've already hurt him so much and he really doesn't deserve that."

"Doesn't deserve that?" Rin repeated, his voice full of disbelief. "He doesn't deserve you! The snobby prince doesn't even realise half how lucky he is to have you."

Except Haruka did. He'd spent his life surrounded by jewels so he had a good idea as to how valuable they were, and Makoto was the most precious gem he had ever encountered. If he lost Makoto, he would never find anyone more exquisite for such a person simply didn't exist.

"Rin," Makoto said again, this time with vibrant chagrin, "Please don't talk about him like that. You two had a rough start, but you don't even know each other. I'm sure you'd get along pretty well if you just gave each other a chance-"

"I could never get along with someone like him."

"I'm telling you, whatever impression you have of him, it's not true. Haru is actually so humble and generous and kind and-"

"He ordered his guard to detain me like I'm some kind of criminal. Does that sound kind to you?"

"You have to see it from his perspective. He had never seen you before and you suddenly grabbed me out of nowhere and started yelling. In his eyes, you were about to punch me in the face."

That brought a tiny smile to Haruka's face. Although he couldn't care less about what Rin thought of him, it was nice to hear Makoto defend him like this.

"I sure felt like it," Rin said and for the first time, there was a hint of amusement in his voice. "In hindsight, I should've done it. You had it coming."

"See?" Makoto chuckled, "You can be very threatening when you're angry. So can you blame him for wanting to protect me? Doesn't that just prove how serious he is about this?"

Rin clicked his tongue. "If he was actually serious, he would've stopped me himself instead of sending his guard after me like a coward."

Perhaps Rin was right. Beginner's mistake. Haruka didn't deem himself to be a violent person at all, but the next time something similar occurred, he would make sure to kick Rin in the shins himself.

"You know, I don't think this is about Haru at all," Makoto stated, "I think you just don't like him because he's a prince."

"I'm not that petty," Rin claimed, but the somewhat offended tone begged to differ, "I don't like him because he acts like he's better than all of us, taunting me like that."

"Sousuke taunted you too when you first met him, yet you don't seem to hold a grudge against him. On the contrary."

Another scoff sounded as Rin whipped his head around like he was afraid his face would betray his true emotions. "That's different!"

"How? Because you like him?"
"Wha- I don't like him!"

"Oh come on. Why else would he be here?" Makoto pressed on in the same teasing tone his father was prone to using, "Just admit that you both fancy each other more than-"

"Shut up!" Rin shoved Makoto away from him, which only made Makoto laugh as he plummeted to the ground. "Just because we're friends doesn't mean that we-"

Rin abruptly ceased talking when he spotted Haruka's head poking out of the backlit hallway and their eyes met. Within a split second, his expression morphed from embarrassed to furious.

"Ha, look who we have here, eavesdropping on a private conversation!"

"I'm not eavesdropping," Haruka said, though arguably, he was doing exactly that. "I'm here to ask if you have Makoto's measurements ready. Your mother and sister would like to start on the suit but they can't do that without his sizes."

"The book is inside. You could've just grabbed it instead of snooping around like a creep!" Rin brushed past him in the narrow door frame, intentionally bumping his shoulder against Haruka's. Whether it was a display of rage or an assertion of dominance, Haruka didn't know, but he did get the impression Rin wasn't as annoyed by his interruption as he was pretending to be.

Makoto scurried to his feet before Haruka could offer him a hand. "Sorry about that," he murmured when he was standing in the doorway beside Haruka and thought Rin was out of earshot. "I don't know how much you heard of that, but I promise Rin isn't a bad guy. He's just very… passionate and brash, but he means well."

"I know," Haruka replied, lightly caressing Makoto's forearms to assure him. Deep down, he knew he shouldn't take Rin's disliking of him to heart, because it wasn't anything personal. Rin might've acted all high and mighty, but it was easy to poke holes in that façade. Truly, he remained upset by Makoto's disappearance, and he needed someone to blame for the feelings he couldn't process. Who better than the prince who swooped in to steal Makoto away for good?

In an odd way, Haruka was even grateful for Rin's scepticism. He believed Makoto was truthful with him, but hearing him confirm his feelings and honesty to someone close to him when he thought Haruka wasn't listening was a great relief. If there had been any morsels of doubt persisting in Haruka's smitten heart, they evaporated for good. Now, he was sure he wouldn't have any regrets.

"He's always been very protective of those he cares about, but he doesn't know how to express it properly." Makoto grasped his elbows in return, an apologetic look painted across his features. "I'm sorry you've become the target of his anger, but I know he'll turn around once he gets to know you for real. Please take him with a grain of salt until then."

"I will." If he was Makoto's friend, then Haruka was willing to suffer the blow without fighting back. And maybe, in some unfathomable manner, Rin and he could slowly grow to become friends too.

A tender smile adorned Makoto's face. "Thank you."

"If you're going to suck faces, please do it outside where I don't have to see it," Rin commented crudely from near the sofa, "Or else I might throw up."

Nevermind, scrap that.
"I guess you're not invited to our wedding, then. We wouldn't want you to ruin our day just because you're so incompetent you can't even control your own esophagus," Haruka retorted without hesitation, and Makoto puffed up his cheeks in exasperation.

"Guys!"

The streets remained vacant and quiet when Makoto escorted Haruka - and Sousuke - back to the inn. His suit was far from complete, but the clock ticked on relentlessly. When Makoto noticed Haruka's eyes slipped shut every couple of seconds as he fought against sleep, he concluded the time had come for them to go to bed. They had a long journey ahead and it was important that all of them, but Sousuke especially, would be well-rested before then.

So they had said their goodnights to the Matsuokas and to his mother, who decided to stay the night so she could optimise every minute to help out with the sewing. In return, Haruka told her she didn't need to worry about breakfast and lunch for the twins because he would take care of it. She was grateful for that, and Makoto would be lying if he said he wasn't too; he didn't want to subject his siblings to his '50% success rate' cooking skills, and Lord only knew what kind of monstrosity his father would serve if left to the task.

Although his mother had told him not to wait for her, Makoto was certain he would find him dozed off at the table, spectacles askew on his nose and head resting stiffly on his arms. For the sake of his father's neck and back, he'd make sure to hurry home.

But first, he wanted to walk Haruka to the inn. It wasn't necessary, for even though it was dark outside, Sousuke had come along specifically to protect Haruka from the wicked and dangerous. But it just didn't feel right to go straight home. It had almost become a tradition for him to walk Haruka back to wherever he was heading, and he wasn't eager to break it yet.

His hand itched to grasp Haruka's and interlock their fingers, and he would've acted on the urge was it not for Sousuke sauntering a meter behind them. Guards were probably used to seeing displays of affection of the guarded, but it felt rather awkward nonetheless so he held himself back. Soon, a time would come when he didn't have to suppress his feelings, and he was zealously anticipating it.

When they reached the inn, they came to a halt in front of the hefty door.

"Goodnight," he said to Sousuke, who muttered a similar phrase, and then he turned to Haruka.

A small smile graced Haruka's face when he took a hold of his hands, affection swimming in the depths of his pupils. He didn't waste a second before he used his grip to draw Makoto in for a hug and buried his face in his shoulder. Their eyes fluttered shut as they squeezed each other and Makoto nuzzled his silky locks.

But comfort was not all Makoto felt in this embrace; like a magnifying glass hovering above a patch of dry grass, his skin burned, moments away from being set ablaze. He opened his eyes and saw Sousuke, whose mindless stare was fixated on their entwined form.

Haruka felt it too and he twisted his neck to look back at his guard, his hold on Makoto faltering.

"Can you give us a minute?"

The annoyance in his voice snapped Sousuke out of his trance. "Right, sorry."

"Thank you."
"Goodnight," Makoto repeated at his retreating form, and when the door fell shut, they were finally, truly alone again.

It had been a winding, exhausting day for both of them and they longed to lay down onto their pillows, but not as much as they longed for each other. A deep sigh left Haruka's nose as he reclaimed his grip on Makoto's body. Makoto smiled and gently caressed his back, rubbing his cheek against Haruka's hair.

"Goodnight, Haru," he whispered like he had nearly every night for the past week, but now, there was no hint of sadness laced through the words.

Their time together was no longer fleeting and he no longer had to cling to each second of his presence. No matter what happened after this, he would be able to bid Haruka sweet dreams for all the nights yet to come, whether they were spent in a carriage, in an enormous bed, or on a quilt beneath a bridge.

As had become a part of their tradition as well, Haruka got up on his toes. His lips, soft as rose petals, pressed a sweet kiss to his cheek and he wrapped his arms around Makoto's neck. There, he strayed from their parting ritual and with the beautiful smile intact, he kissed Makoto's mouth too.

This was his last night in Sano, his last night in his hometown and his last night in his shared bed with the twins. But if that meant he would get a kiss this tender every day before bedtime from now on, Makoto would gladly surrender it all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed! ^^

Although I've been trying to keep up with posting on a character's birthday, this time of the year is a bit tricky when it comes to that. Ikuya's birthday is up first (March 3rd), but I know I won't be able to get the next chapter out before then, and he's not in this fic anyway. Therefore, I'm going to try my best to get it out on Asahi's birthday (April 18th). Asahi isn't in this fic either, but the next birthday would be Kisumi's and that wait's a bit too long for my liking. So take this as a rough estimate, but I'll do my best to get chapter 12 out around Asahi's birthday. Thanks for your patience!

In the meanwhile, you can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr @DatHeetJoella for more MakoHaru content between updates. You can also send me a message on Curious Cat if you want.

Thank you again for reading, I hope to see you again at the next chapter, and for now I wish you a lovely day! :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!