Outlands

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by Maldoror Chant

Summary

Ryou, a relentlessly repressed and controlled accountant, accidentally slips between dimensions. Since he's a practical, cautious man and not a complete idiot, he retraces his steps and slips right back out again. But he's not alone. And now his life is going to take a sharp turn away from "repressed" and "controlled", to very strange places indeed: into a warped image of the past and into a very uncertain future, through war and violence, to the very edges of reality and beyond.

Notes

This original work, first posted on LJ donkey's years ago, was written for fun and is not all that serious. Involves complete bastardisation of physics, history and linguistics. Later chapters will involve some graphic violence, nudity and sexuality.
Chapter 1

In Tokyo's finance district and in Ujiie Securities & Trading co. in particular, a salaryman with any kind of ambition would never dream of leaving before his manager. Not even if one's manager was Ujiie Ryou, first born son of Ujiie Tsukasa, president of Ujiie S&T and an all-around workaholic.

Eight o'clock rolled around, and every tired eye in the room started ping-ponging between the clock on the wall and the back of Ryou's monitor. Ryou ignored the distraction out of habit. He finished reading the article on stock in Norway, noting down a few concepts he would have to research later if the new contract with that oil company's financial branch was signed. As if in answer to his thoughts, an email from the president popped up in his inbox. The old man was also working late, of course. There was a mention of the new contract, and a lunch meeting tomorrow. Ryou entered it into his planner, locked his station and switched off his screen.

When he glanced up through the glass walls of his office, the eyes of all his subordinates were once more riveted on their monitors. The wave of relief was nonetheless palpable. Only eight thirty; the heir apparent was making an early night of it.

Ryou walked out of the room without a word and no gesture apart from a nod in response to Sasaki's faint bow. Other than a few interchangeable interns, this department had been together for a couple of years now and it was established that there was no need for the rigmarole of 'thank you for your hard work', 'please give me your guidance tomorrow' or even 'goodnight'. Silence followed him out the door. It did not swing shut fast enough to block out the sounds of chairs hastily pushed back, chatter starting, a chuckle.

His cell rang halfway down the corridor. Ryou juggled briefcase, coat and scarf to get at it. Maybe the president needed some more numbers tonight. That chuckle might have been a trifle premature.

It wasn't the president. Ryou looked at the display for a second - the phone rang again, jarring in the silence of the corridor - then he flipped it open.

"Hello, mother. I don't have much time, I'm heading towards the elevator."

"I won't be long. I just wanted to know if you wanted me to contact Ayashima-san for..." She let it dangle there, since she would not presume to appear to put pressure on her eldest son.

"I will be very busy this week."

"This weekend is fine, I'm sure," said his mother in the voice she'd learned to use at the president's business dinners, polished to a fine degree until it slid past as smooth as silk, no roughness on which an objection could catch. She had fewer of those parties these days, both she and the president were getting older and leaving even the necessary customer socializing to their managers and the younger members of the board. She'd been calling him up more and more this past year as a result, often to say very little, and occasionally she'd been drunk. She hadn't done that for months now; this whole omiai affair was giving her some focus.

"I can make it this weekend," Ryou said, either prompted by the tone or the thought that had followed it.

"She is a very proper woman. Very intelligent too. This will be your third odeto now. Have you thought...? Ayashima-san said her family-"

"I'm at the elevator now." Ryou hit the button and it obligingly dinged open right on cue. The
cleaners must have started the other offices on this floor.

"Your father will be eating at home this Friday evening. Yuki will be there too." His mother never asked him to come, never put herself forward, certainly never mentioned that it'd been nearly half a year since the two brothers had seen each other and that if marriage was in the air, family suppers would soon be all too rare. She was the president's wife; before that, she'd been some other president's daughter. She was all too good at this.

Through Ryou's mind flashed their last family supper all together, a rarity since he'd moved into his condo and Yuki had started his residency at Daisiki General. The four of them seated around the table for one of their mother's laboriously prepared dinners (she was old school; Ryou hoped his future wife would find better things to do with her time and get these things catered). Ryou and the president spoke frequently at business luncheons, so they'd had nothing to say. His mother had kept the conversation spinning for awhile, and then she and the president had concentrated on getting Yuki to accept uncle Hamano's help to get into an exclusive hospital with more reputed surgeons. Ryou remembered how the evening had finished.

The elevator door shut behind him. The opposite wall was all mirror. Ryou studied his expression with a habit born of half a lifetime. His face did not show the thought that had fleeted through his mind. Show them nothing.

"I will see if I can free my schedule. Goodnight, mother."

If the president had made the time, Ryou would certainly go too, unless the Noruma account went south late Thursday afternoon. Which wouldn't be impossible to arrange, but Ryou did not consider it for a moment. Numbers could be made to do magic, but not for reasons that trivial. He'd go to the dinner. It would be no big deal since he'd already agreed to the third, and almost certainly final, odeto with Misuko-san. His parents were fully proud and content with the path Ryou had chosen both socially and professionally, so they'd spend their time working on Yuki. As long as Yuki managed to ignore the attempts and not say anything anyone would regret, Ryou would be able to get out of work early on Friday and enjoy a traditional Japanese meal the likes of which he'd not had for months now.

As the elevator hummed its way down to the underground parking, Ryou closed his eyes, resting them. He had to make time to go see an ophthalmologist. A different one who would not tell him to sit less in front of a screen, but would give him the correct prescription for his glasses that would do away with this blurriness and ache, and all without any superfluous comment. He'd ask Sasaki to find him one tomorrow. His assistant was good at that sort of thing. A serious young man who was going to go far. He was certainly not the one who'd chuckled back there.

Ryou opened his eyes to see his reflection staring back at him, impassive. His office workers called him the Ice Prince. The triteness of it annoyed him, but he approved of the sentiment.

The parking space beneath the building was the one privilege Ryou had gotten for being the president's son. Other than that, he'd started off at Ujiie S&T at the level his excellence in his accounting studies had merited. Not only had he not benefited from any favours, the president and the various 'uncles' from the board and management made doubly sure Ryou didn't screw up, and came down on him twice as hard if he did. Ryou had worked his way up the hard way to his current post as manager of Institutional Securities, Japanese Branch, but at least he'd not had to squeeze himself into a subway car every day to do so.

Only the president's Acura was left tonight in the section reserved for the board and upper management. The old man drove himself home half the time, other times he had Koga, Sasaki's equivalent, take him home and pick him up the next day. Home, or the rented apartment which was
considerably closer. Ryou's Nissan, smaller and deferential, was a few stalls away.

Ryou drove it up the parking ramp into a night crushed by the looming buildings of the financial district. Workers were still trickling out of the offices, heading to eateries or bars before they started the long trudge home. Their flow across streets slowed traffic; it took him thirty minutes to get out of the core, heading past the turn that would take him to his condo. But he felt like driving tonight. The streets were emptier now; he was cruising through daylight shopping districts all but deserted apart from a few tourists wandering around. Ryou watched the streetlights flash by overhead, one by one by one, and thought of the Noruma account, which could well turn into a problem on Thursday anyway despite his best efforts. He thought of his omiai with Misuko-san. He thought of the fat mole on the cheek of Ayashima-san, Ryou's go-between and his mother's long-time friend, older and uglier but just as deadly with a polite non-suggestion. He thought of Shore, then he forced himself to not think of Shore, but his car was halfway to the seedier part of the entertaining district by now. Ryou suspected he'd been heading there all evening, long before he'd gotten behind the wheel...

Some time later, he stopped at the usual place, a street away, and looked out the tinted window of his Nissan. There were two young men out there now, despite the cold of January. He didn't recognize either of them. It would have been easier to get out of the car if it'd been Keigo, or that half-blood who always wore dark glasses and teasingly refused to give his name...

Ryou shouldn't be here. He was going to get married soon. Maybe that was a very good reason to be here.

Ryou's eyes twitched to the rear-view mirror, but he couldn't see his expression. The car was dark, anyway.

Maybe Keigo was inside Shore. The bar was down some steps, as discreet as it could be to cater to men like him. Men just like him. The thought really did not make him want to get out of the car.

He was meeting the president for lunch tomorrow, his mother had called him on the phone and he was going to see Yuki again on Friday. He was also meeting his future wife for the third time this weekend. He had no business here.

If anyone of the men he knew from previous visits had come out of Shore at that time, Ryou would have gotten out of the car. Instead, another car stopped near the two young men leaning against the railing beneath the blue neon waves of Shore. One of them walked over to see what the driver wanted. Ryou knew exactly what the driver wanted, and the thought made him switch on the ignition and drive away.

He focused on the Noruma account. The problem was their CFO. There was nothing wrong with Ryou's numbers; the CFO just couldn't believe them because he did not realize how much numbers could be made to do.

Ryou stopped at a red light. He'd driven off in the wrong direction to get away from Shore without going along the same street as that other car, but he knew roughly where he was, an area where the high-stake Mah-jong parlours were the classiest venue. There were four young men in leather jackets and jeans outside a building that bore no sign to announce its business. They were shoving each other and laughing too loud, just looking at them was irritating in some way. Ryou checked his car door was locked and went back to his numbers.

Numbers had more substance than this place. They could level this entire block and replace it with condos in a month. Numbers could drive Noruma into bankruptcy or into a higher sphere of trading. Numbers were what those yakuza and high-stake losers were grasping for in those Mah-jong
parlours, but the numbers Ryou had in his head turned their innings and this entire section of the metropolis into a joke, a wisp of smoke, a blossom falling.

The president and the board had asked him to produce the numbers that would convince Noruma. If that request didn't include an intrinsic human factor, it would be easy to do. There was nothing even remotely illegal in Ryou's proposals and figures, and they represented an adequate margin of risk which he'd already calculated. The necessity to deal with people made this sort of affair slow and difficult; by themselves, numbers could change the world.

*What- a wall?!!*

Ryou slammed on the brakes. He hadn't been driving fast, but the Nissan slithered over the paving, wheels locking helplessly until the car thudded into the sidewalk. It jumped the curb, sideswiped a mailbox and ran into the wall with a crunch of crumpled metal.

Ryou gasped, then tore away from the deployed air bag. He fought it to open his door and took a shaky step out of the car to lean against the side.

There was snow beneath his feet.

This was very wrong. The fact that he'd suddenly found himself running into a wall while he was crossing a clearly marked and empty intersection was much worse, but that was so wrong that it didn't fit into his mind right now. The snow was something he could perceive. Why was there snow on the ground? It hardly ever snowed in Tokyo, and the winter up until now had been mild. More to the point, there hadn't been any snow a moment before.

Ryou automatically checked his glasses, found a bruise near his ear where the airbag had pushed the stem into his skin.

The mailbox was destroyed, caved in and ripped from its grounding. No letters scattered about, though. It was empty. In fact, looking closer, it was rusty and the paint was peeling. But it was very definitely destroyed now. Would his insurance pay for that? He'd never been in an accident before.

Ryou chased away the disorientation. Self-control was as old a habit as checking for any betraying expression on his face. Ryou prosaically reached for his phone, trying to decide who to call. Would the car still run? It didn't look that badly damaged. The front was totalled, but would the engine still turn over? Better call a towing company to start with.

No signal.

This evening was just getting better and better.

Ryou pushed up his glasses and looked around. What a great place to have an accident in. Fortunately he was a dozen blocks away from those young men laughing and shoving at each other.

The young men weren't here, but neither were the Mah-jong parlours, cheap bars, cheaper motels and pawn shops. The buildings looked the same, but there were no neons, no lights; doors were hanging open and all the windows he could see were broken.

No lights. Ryou looked up, almost reluctantly. A round fat moon was shining overhead. Otherwise all the streetlights were out. But the sky had been cloudy grey a minute before. Ryou had been distracted by the Noruma account but he distinctly remembered thinking to himself that the sky looked like the slate table around which his mother arranged the dishes of their family meals together.

No sound of traffic, but some noise like a thump and a clang nearby-
Someone shouted off to Ryou's left. Ryou dropped his cell-phone. He quickly leaned down and picked it up, eyes scanning the wall he'd run into. A loud thud had come from behind it, a scuffle and another clang. And a grunt. Someone was fighting.

The fact that he'd fished his phone out of snow that hadn't been there a moment before, and that he'd crashed into a sudden wall that had also been conspicuous by its absence previously, had dulled Ryou's Tokyo-dweller reflexes. Instead of getting into the car, locking the door and vainly attempt to call the police, he stumbled to where a part of the wall had crumbled and broken into slabs of concrete. The rubble was like a ramp leading to what turned out to be a construction site, in all appearances abandoned after the workers had reduced the previous building to stubs of walls and no more.

The scene was framed in the V of the broken down section of wall as if it were on display. It was quite clear beneath the light of the moon. The scene was too clear for Ryou to try to deny it, even if it had no business being in Tokyo, or anywhere other than a TV screen.

The edges of Ryou's vision trembled and darkened. But Ryou had been through moments like these - not like this, but moments when the body and the mind wanted to hide, to deny this was happening. He knew the price one paid for that momentary lapse. His hand automatically reached up for his glasses, shoving them up, fingers ran down his cheeks to make sure. Show them nothing. Good, now to deal with this.

The thing flat on its back stirred, further marring the crust of snow it'd fallen in. It looked like a robot; the kind he'd seen on TV when he'd visited his friends' houses when he was younger, before they'd grown up and life had gotten complicated. But it was a robot made out of trash, not metal; bits of concrete, bones made of rebar, a wooden half-beam for a spine, chicken wire wrapped around stones and a large empty tin can where a head should be. The head, if that's what it was, was pinned to the ground with a sword.

It stirred again. Slower this time. The thing wasn't in any way human, but it seemed that the sword meant that it wasn't a danger anymore, if it ever had been. It looked like it was dying. Ryou looked away from the sword sticking through the chicken-wire-trash-head to the man standing over the creature and reaching for the weapon. The man jerked the sword out and moved back warily, eyes on the thing. He was hunched over in a way that suggested he was in pain. He leaned against the sword like a cane, breathed out with a hiss, and then looked up at Ryou.

They stared at each other. The man made no hostile gesture towards Ryou. He looked surprised to see him.

He was not dressed like some yankee, much less like a yakuza. He was wearing a knee-length tunic with metal plates sewn on it. Some of the plates were dented, blood seeping through the cloth. The man was holding his side beneath the injury. He was a foreigner, strong features around a beak of a nose; a short, well-kept beard, brown hair down to his shoulders with small disks tied into the ends. He was quite the most extraordinary thing Ryou had ever seen in his life, and he belonged in Tokyo far less than something like Godzilla did.

The thing at the man's feet made a cracking sound. Their attention leaped back to it, but it was only settling into the garbage-strewn ground and the muddied snow. Dying? Could one say that? Ryou watched a half-brick fall off a 'leg'. Then he glanced back at the foreigner just as the other man did the same. They stared at each other some more. The stranger appeared to be puzzled at the lack of reaction. Ryou was busy thinking along practical lines. With the dearth of signal, he wasn't going to be able to call an ambulance, though the man sure looked like he could use one. Assuming an ambulance could find them in the first place...
"Do you know where we are? Are we..." Ryou glanced around at the low-rise buildings which looked familiar, yet alien in their deserted state, the streets totally empty without a single light shining. "Are we still in Tokyo?"

A small wrinkle appeared between the foreigner's brow. Ah, of course. Why would he speak Japanese? Ryou pushed his glasses up and was about to repeat the question in his best English when-

It hurt. It hurt him in a way he couldn't begin to comprehend, deep inside and along every inch of his being. Whatever it was, it's existence was a worse insult to reality than the snow, the broken, deserted streets and the jump-out-of-nowhere wall. And it was materializing thirty feet away from him. He couldn't see it, but he knew it was there. Its presence made Ryou's head ache, it made him want to throw up.

The foreigner made an interrogative noise. Ryou could feel the way the blood had drained from his own face. He must look like someone had stuck him with something sharp too.

"There's- there's something-

The air ripped apart on the other end of the construction zone with a soft noise and a wash of putrid air. The stranger spun to face it.

The air puckered and darkened beneath the moonlight, turning into some kind of tube that was hideously organic in look. Ryou had seen the same shape on a nature program, the short, pulsing laying tube of a wasp queen. It shuddered, bunched and squeezed out a pale ball - the image of an egg-laying duct was more than an image now, it was a reality overtaking Ryou's world, wobbling at the edges of his vision in time with his frantic heartbeat.

"Fuck," said the foreigner, or something like it. Ryou wasn't sure he'd heard the word right but the tone was unmistakable.

The pale sphere was the size of a large beach ball. It was wiggling as it rolled on the ground, a leathery pouch which caught on a projection, broke and oozed open. Trickles of transparent fluid and a white shape in the middle. A- a baby, something like a baby rather, hideously swollen belly and head and dead-white limbs that were unfinished parodies, like something that'd been aborted and flushed down a sewer. Ryou's stomach lurched, but it was a distant feeling. His sense of reality had hit an event horizon and shut down; his mind and reflexes were now focusing entirely on survival.

...He did not know where the knowledge that he was in mortal peril was coming from. The thing looked as harmless as a newborn, it was flapping its useless appendages in the dirt, getting them encrusted with stones and mud as it wiggled and squawled. The only thing dangerous here was the laying tube that had spawned it, still formed of nothing but air and space twisted on itself like an umbilical cord from another dimension. It was whipping around and scoring the ground blindly. The thing's efforts seemed directionless, even counterproductive; a slash against the remains of a wall caved in what was left of it and buried half of its spawn in rubble.

The foreigner had taken an intent step forward, sword gripped tight - but the tube burst into a frenzy, digging into hard concrete effortlessly and hurling it at them. He took a step back as a chunk of concrete the size of his head rolled towards him and Ryou. Garbage clattered left and right. Ryou felt a rock hit him on the shoulder, leaving a smudge of mud, and then a sharp pain made him gasp and try to shelter his injured head with his arms. When he glanced up again, the cuff of his suit was red with blood.

What he saw made him forget his injury. The rubble that had fallen onto the 'baby' now gripped the weak lower body and useless legs and started to move with a purpose, a blunt stump of debris...
thumping the ground as if trying to get purchase.

It's the same, Ryou realized, mouth dry. It's the same thing as the other creature, it's going to become another garbage-robot or whatever- The thing lying at the foreigner's feet was nearly six foot of concrete chunks, broken glass, stone and metal. Ryou would have said it was unbeatable, unkillable, if it hadn't been lying there as evidence to the contrary.

The tube was writhing more and more frantically. It was dwindling, sucked back into wherever it'd come from. But the spawn was still there. It already had a torso of corrugated steel, two legs and one arm, and its head was already covered in debris.

The foreigner hefted his sword with a grimace. Then he let it fall back onto his shoulder and turned towards Ryou.

"Hey, Inlander. If you run now, it'll leave you alone. Go." Then he turned back towards the thing, which was already struggling to its 'feet'.

Still in that sense of calm hovering above panic, Ryou looked from the nearly-completed monster, to the one that was dead, then to the man's wounded side. The stranger had gotten injured killing the first. Now that he was facing a new one, he was almost certainly going to die.

"You should run away too."

The foreigner glanced back like he couldn't believe Ryou was still there. Then he grinned. It was fierce and free and it went right through Ryou's soul in a way the sight of the monsters had failed to.

"It'll follow until I collapse. They're persistent. Bugger off, Inlander, and forget about all this." Then he walked towards his death as if he hadn't a regret in the world.

Ryou turned and ran, feet slipping in the snow.

The monster was ludicrous standing up, short thick legs of garbage, the bent lid of a metal trashcan sticking out of its thigh, a short thick body and long unarticulated arms like clubs. But it trudged forward with the fast, ever-falling tread of a tank. The foreigner stood his ground, a little crouched, body loose, until the last minute, and then he dodged the left arm and struck at the head, a foot above his own. The sword glanced off garbage, failing to pierce. The monster's arms spun with no care as to the direction of shoulders and, despite its human opponent ducking, it managed to catch him and buffet him to the ground. The man rolled and got to his knees, shaking his head-

At which point the Nissan hit the creature at as full a speed as it could manage across a broken-down construction site.

Ryou gunned the motor and thanked his countrymen for making such sturdy cars when the engine still turned over. It was making the sound of a Nissan which was going to die in a few minutes, but if it could get them away- Ryou threw himself over to the passenger door, shoved it open and shouted, "Get in!"

The foreigner was staring as if he found the car a harder concept to grasp than the monsters. But when Ryou shouted, he surged to his feet and half fell into the car. Ryou grabbed his hand and hit the accelerator with his foot without looking, because from the way the car was juddering, the thing was still alive and trying to get out from under the front wheels. He'd put the car into reverse the moment he'd knocked the creature down. The vehicle shot back. The foreigner gasped, his hand on Ryou's closing with a deathgrip that would leave bruises, but he managed to haul himself up with Ryou's help into the seat. The door crashed against a concrete outcropping and ripped off, causing
the car to slew. Then a club of detritus hit the ground where the hood had been a split second before.

Ryou, with an iron grasp on his panic, stopped flooring the accelerator before he drowned the motor. The car stopped ploughing the mud and leapt back as it got a grip - his passenger clung to the back of the seat he'd grabbed for dear life - and shot back through the wire gate that Ryou had fortunately found to be half open and unlocked when he'd driven around the construction lot.

The monster was broken, he realized with one glance back, scythed at the middle. But until it was dead, it could presumably rebuild itself. Ryou felt the fleeting temptation to go back and roll over it some more until it stopped moving for good, but he didn't think the Nissan would hold out very long, and he didn't want to be on foot anywhere near the creature if it wasn't dead. Besides, the tube-thing could come back and lay more, presumably.

The Nissan's wheels made a pitiful screeching noise as Ryou pulled the car around and ran.

Desperately empty streets flashed by on either side. Nobody around to help, no policeman in efficient and crisp uniform, no cars that weren't on their last legs, no safe condo with multiple locks on the door.

The stranger made an involuntary noise of pain as he slumped into the seat. Ryou glanced over at him. The man was sweating despite the cold air blowing in through the gap left by the door, his face was pale. The blood had spread so far that his tunic looked more red than pale brown now. That was a lot of blood to lose. Ryou blinked as more blood trickled into his own eye. He glanced automatically at the rear-view mirror. His hair was stuck so firmly in the bloody gash on his forehead, spearing towards his left temple, that the gummed strands weren't even blowing around in the wind. It looked obscene, something that- that red and messy and revealing on his own face. Ryou returned his eyes to the road, a fixed stare. The Nissan sounded more and more unhappy, and it was staggering all over the street like a drunk; one or several of the wheels must be punctured.

What they needed, Ryou decided with a clarity that went down to the bottom of his being, what they needed was a way out of these weird empty streets and away from that ugly egg-laying rift in reality. They needed back to where there were people, and they needed medical care. Ryou was not going to get killed in this strange area of what was certainly not Tokyo by some dirt-born monster. Neither was he going to let a man who'd smiled like the foreigner had back there die in the passenger seat of his Nissan. It was not going to be.

A car horn suddenly blared.

Ryou shouted in shock and jerked the wheel. A car in the opposite lane screeched at them in a voice of brakes and turning wheels. The Nissan shot past it, missing it by half a foot, and wound up alongside the curb of a side street, at the edges of the parking lot of a shopping center.

They were back in the Tokyo Ryou knew. Not where he'd been before, though. Several miles of metropolis separated them from that neighbourhood of mah-jong parlours and small-time hoods. Ryou had the feeling he'd been here before, but he couldn't place it immediately. He didn't waste the effort to try. His head ached, a feeling of nausea was distantly plaguing him, but his thoughts were on another plane, the one where they operated when dealing in higher mathematics and statistics.

He looked at his passenger. The man was staring out the gap in the car at a nearby shop, the display still lit by streetlights, headless mannequins posing for them. Then he turned the same stunned look on Ryou.

"Magian," he said.
"My phone's working again." Ryou knew it before he even flicked it open, and was not in any way surprised to see the No Service sign gone. "I'm calling an ambulance. Pull yourself together, it won't be long."

The foreigner said something that came out in an incomprehensible mumble, and slumped in the seat. Ryou dropped the phone to catch him. The man was heavier than Ryou anticipated. He'd looked tall standing in the rubble back there, a fierce, free, animalistic presence, the kind of man who could drive a sharp piece of metal through a head-sized lump of compacted trash as if it was a day at the office. But this was really not the time to get distracted, thought Ryou distantly, still thinking hard. His hand had touched those metal disks sowed onto the blood-soaked tunic as he steadied the stranger against him. There were other complications as well. Data, in a way. Data that needed to be slotted into an equation. In human terms, there were multiple ways to work the numbers to achieve something, but there was always an optimal route, the best figures to get to the desired result with an acceptable minimum of risk and possible snags...

Fortunately nobody had stopped in the busy road beyond them, every driver assuming that someone else would stop and help if Ryou had had an accident, if he wasn't simply drunk and cutting corners. This gave Ryou a little leeway, a little extra time to nudge things in the direction they needed to go.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ryou, a relentlessly repressed and controlled accountant, accidentally slips between dimensions. Since he's a practical, cautious man and not a complete idiot, he retracts his steps and slips right back out again. But he's not alone. And now his life is going to take a sharp turn away from "repressed" and "controlled", to very strange places indeed: into a warped image of the past and into a very uncertain future, through war and violence, to the very edges of reality and beyond.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The light shining into his eye flicked off, leaving Ryou to blink away red afterimages.

Yuki swapped the pocket flashlight for a pen and picked up his patient's chart. Ryou took this as permission to put his glasses back on.

"Good eye movement, no signs of retinal tear or intracranial swelling, sutures are okay," Ryou's brother concluded, and in the same breath and tone he added, "I just cannot believe someone like you would be dumb enough to get involved in a gang fight. Why didn't you call the police?"

"I was not thinking straight, I told you."

The stare Yuki gave him above the rim of the chart suggested that the idea of Ujiie Ryou not thinking straight did not fit into his version of reality. It seemed he'd rather suspect Ryou of some bizarre, probably business-related reason to intervene in a fight. Fortunately the police had been nowhere near as suspicious of the department head of an important financial firm.

"I have some clothes here for you," said Yuki, giving up on stubborn brothers. "Your assistant dropped them off."

"Sasaki? I didn't see him."

"Since he also brought folders and a laptop, I did not allow him to enter your room. Until you sign out, you're my patient - or rather Arimata-sensei's, but she let me be the attending since you asked for me. I'm not having a head trauma case pestered less than twenty-four hours after admission."

"You said I wasn't concussed."

"No, but you were in a car accident and then pelted with stones or whatever. You need rest."

Ryou reminded himself that Yuki had, from the earliest age, gone through life with that faintly hostile, suspicious air on his angular face, and so that 'whatever' was not necessarily a sign his brother doubted his story. It was a good thing Yuki had decided to become a surgeon rather than a physician, though; he had the drive, the skill and the lack of more than rudimentary bedside manners that would allow him to go far in his chosen profession.

Yuki put away the chart and pen and rearranged his stethoscope. He looked different in those scrubs;
professional, confident, mature. Ryou's perception of his brother had lagged a bit behind, clinging to the sullen, abrupt adolescent of a few years back. This soon-to-be surgeon was a surprise. Somewhat good looking, too, despite the semi-permanent frown. Their mother would probably not have to arrange an omiai for Yuki, which was good as he would never put up with that kind of parental interference in his life.

Yuki stuck his hands in the pockets of his scrubs and stared at Ryou with a curiosity he did not try to hide. He was obviously intrigued by his older brother's actions the previous evening and the set of circumstances that had landed Ryou in his care. It would have been better if Ryou's Nissan had not reappeared near Daisiki General, where the ambulance Ryou had called had naturally taken them. Why the Nissan had reappeared near Daisiki General was a question Ryou was trying not to contemplate. He was aware that, during that last minute in not-Tokyo, thinking of medical aid had brought his brother to mind, but he did not see how that could have influenced anything. Since he understood absolutely nothing about that experience last night, speculation was not going to get him very far.

"What I don't understand-" Yuki started to say when a soft knock interrupted him.

"Who is it?" Yuki asked, turning towards the door. Daisiki General was not an exclusive clinic like some, but it had private rooms and the president had naturally made sure his eldest son was in the best available.

The door opened and Detective Kimura stuck his head into the room. "I apologize for my intrusion, doctor," he said, not sounding all that sorry.

"You already talked to my brother today," Yuki said sharply before the detective could even explain what he wanted. "He's told you all he knows. It's seven o'clock at night, he needs to rest-"

"Oh? Arimata-sensei said he was going to be discharged tomorrow. I took it he was doing well." Kimura gave Ryou a kindly smile. He had a face built for it, benevolent, round, a little shiny, as friendly as a full moon. Ryou suspected it was a mask as adept as his own.

"It's okay, Yuki," Ryou said before his brother could get into an argument. "Did you want to see me, detective?" They must have found inconsistencies in the story Ryou had spun for them. It was inevitable. Now he was going to have to be very, very careful.

"Yes, I wanted to ask you a few more questions about the man you rescued." Kimura sat down on a chair near Ryou's bed after a respectful nod.

"I don't think I can say I rescued him," said Ryou with automatic modesty one would expect of him in the circumstances. "I swerved and crashed to avoid him as he staggered out into the street, and then I just got him away from those hooligans. I'd gotten lost while driving around the town, and I'm not even sure where all this happened, or why."

"Yes, you told me so this morning," said Kimura in a way that left Ryou no way of guessing how badly the detective doubted his story. "Tell me, Ujiie-san, did he say anything to you?"

"No, he was injured, he couldn't tell me his name or what his attackers wanted."

"I mean, did he speak to you? Did he say anything?"

Kimura's insistence made Ryou cautious. Sure, the stranger had spoken a little, but since the first words that came to mind referred to the persistence of garbage-monsters, Ryou did not intend to mention them. He took the safer option without hesitation. "No, he was pretty incoherent and he
passed out soon after I started driving."

Kimura did not ask him once more all the questions he'd asked this morning, the reasonable questions such as where had all this happened exactly, what had the men who'd done this looked like, how long had Ryou driven, why hadn't he called an ambulance sooner. Ryou had given as little information as he could, hiding behind the excuse of panic-born confusion from his accident, the violence he'd witnessed and having a stranger bleeding all over the leather interior of his car. He'd expected this to get challenged again when Kimura showed up tonight, but the detective merely nodded.

"Even if he didn't make sense, did he use any recognizable word at all?"

Kimura was definitely fishing for something..."No. Why?"

"I see, I see." Kimura got to his feet. "Never mind, I just wanted to confirm something."

"What?"

"It appears this foreigner doesn't speak any Japanese. No English either."

Kimura was already turning to go, but he was looking over his shoulder, studying Ryou's expression as he dropped those words, and his astute gaze was in no way as casual as his tone. But Ryou had years of experience keeping his face impassive by now.

"Oh, you mean he's awake?" was all he said.

Kimura smiled, still watching him. "Yes, he came to early this morning. A tough man, that one. Even though his injuries weren't critical, he'd gotten badly battered and had lost a lot of blood. He can't seem to tell us who he is, though, where he comes from or what language he speaks. We were wondering if he said anything to you."

"How could he if he doesn't speak Japanese?"

"It appears he doesn't speak Japanese," Kimura corrected him gently. "But neither is he making much effort to communicate. Never mind, we'll find out who he is soon enough. If you'll excuse me-"

"May I see him?" Ryou had to ask, letting the words slip past his better judgment. The question had been burning in him this morning when Kimura had interviewed him, and he'd been forcing the words back every time his brother checked up on him today. The Tokyo outside his hospital window was real, but so was the place he'd been last night. Ryou's mind was labouring in an effort to reconcile the two, because he knew that as long as he lived, he'd never forget those brief minutes spent there however much he tried. He had to understand this, he had to put this experience in its place. The man he'd brought back from over there was the link between the two worlds, the living proof. It might be safer to bury his head in the sand, go back to his condo, get drunk, have a panic attack and go work on the Noruma account the next day, but Ryou could no more do that than fly.

Kimura did not look surprised at the request. The speed with which he turned around and handed Ryou a shiny smile suggested he'd been hoping for it. "If you don't mind, Ujiie-san. He might remember you."

"Wait a minute," said Yuki. "My brother needs to rest, not get dragged across the hospital to see some criminal who got himself bludgeoned and stabbed."

Ryou was already slipping the robe his mother had brought him over his hospital clothes. "It's
alright, Yuki. Besides, we don't know he's a criminal. Maybe he's a tourist who was attacked by vagrants."

"A man doesn't end up in *that* kind of state if he doesn't know his attackers or speak their language."

"You mean you saw him?" Ryou glanced back at his brother, who was following them down the hall.

Yuki shrugged in his usual prickly way. "You were asking about his health, so I just went to check. But he is not a man you should concern yourself with. Ito-sensei, the head of ICU, told me he'd been hit with a bat with nails in it, or some such weapon, as well as kicked and struck in the head. You're not telling me a tourist would get into that kind of fight to save a measly camera. Is this really necessary, detective?"

"Have no concerns, doctor." The faint frown in Kimura's otherwise smooth demeanour gave Ryou the intuition the detective had not wanted that many details of the case spread around. "He's done nothing violent or threatening since he regained consciousness. Because he was badly assaulted by persons unknown, and cannot give us an explanation or an ID, I stationed one of my men outside his door as a routine measure. You can go about your duties, Ujiie-sensei, I'll keep your brother perfectly safe and unbothered."

"You haven't found out anything about this guy at all?" said Yuki, walking right behind the detective and either missing the hint or choosing not to pick it up. "How about his clothes?"

"What about them?" asked Kimura guardedly.

"The nurse who cut them off said you'd asked her for them. They were odd, according to her; she said they looked home-made."

"I'm afraid I can't comment on that, doctor."

That nurse had no idea what 'odd' was. Fortunately for her peace of mind, Ryou had, in the few minutes before the ambulance came, managed to strip the foreigner of his tunic with the reinforcing metal disks. It'd turned out to be laced down both sides with leather tongs and easy to remove. High around his waist had been cinched multiple layers of cloth falling to mid-thigh like a skirt, which would presumably protect both his stomach and crotch. Ryou, still in the head space where only data mattered, had removed that too, along with the man's swordbelt. Then he'd buried the items as deep as he could in one of the shop dumpsters near the car where hopefully nobody would notice them. There would have been too many questions and complications if the hapless tourist he'd saved had come equipped in light armour. But he hadn't been able to do anything about the stranger's pants and undershirt, the latter too tight to slip off without causing his injuries to bleed more, despite Ryou's jacket knotted around him to staunch the flow. Both garments had been dark brown, where they weren't sodden with blood, made of crude linen that did have a handcrafted feel. But it sort of went with the long hair and the disks plaited into it, and Ryou had hoped it would not excite too much comment. One of those Westerner new-age type visiting Asia to connect with some nostalgic and inexact vision of the past, or some such.

The only thing Ryou had been totally unable to control was what the man would say when he woke up. He'd hoped to pass off talk of monsters and deserted streets as hallucinations, trauma, the influence of drugs, anything. It was not like anyone would believe the foreigner without proof, though it would still have required some finessing on Ryou's part. But now that seemed to not be a problem at all. That was just a little too good to be true...Why wasn't the man talking? He could speak Japanese. Apart from that last word, 'magian', Ryou had understood everything the stranger had said, even when he would rather have gone ignorant.
"We're keeping him in his own room," said Kimura, exiting the elevator at the Intensive Care floor. "He'll be fit to be discharged by next week. We're just not sure where to. No embassy has come forth to claim him, unfortunately, and he's not actually done anything wrong since Ujiie-san can't remember him being armed or fighting back." Ryou kept his face on neutral as an image of the stranger swinging the sword, the one that'd been dropped back in the construction site, floated through his mind. "If he won't tell us who he is, where he's from and what he was involved in...well, the rest needn't concern you, Ujiie-san. Here we are."

Ryou pushed up his glasses. He didn't really see the policeman getting up from his chair to salute, or the nurse peeking at them curiously from the corridor.

Apart from hospital clothes, the foreigner was exactly the same as Ryou remembered. He sat there in the raised bed, resting his back against the incline, hands on his knees, a pose that was considerably more active and watchful than one usually saw in a hospital. He was so...real. There was an intensity about him that had not looked out of place when he was fighting for his life in a construction site, but here made him stand out in a way that was much harder to conceal than bloodied armour. Ryou found himself wondering how on earth Kimura hadn't figured it all out already when it was as obvious and plain-to-see as the bed's pillows. With this man, and all that had happened last night, staring at him, things like the Noruma account suddenly seemed like a dream Ryou had woken up from.

"You finally showed up," said the stranger. "Good. We don't have much time, magian, so listen to me carefully."

That brought Ryou back to the present in a hurry. Great, how was he going to explain that to the detective? It was going to appear as if he was in collusion with a man who fought gangs for a hobby-

"What kind of language is that?" asked Yuki, nonplussed.

With every ounce of control Ryou had gained throughout his life, he managed not to betray his surprise. He knew without looking that Kiruma was watching him.

"I don't understand him either," he said, keeping his voice on a tight rein.

The stranger's eyes flickered towards Kimura, and when he spoke, he appeared to be addressing the detective, but Ryou knew who he was talking to all right. "Nobody can understand me if they haven't studied the Lore and broken the Curse. I can't understand their jabber either. That just leaves you. You're going to get me out of this place and back to the Outlands."

"I don't understand what you're saying, sir," said Kimura in adequate English. "Do you understand me?"

Ryou, for his part, said nothing.

"If you don't get me back, my enemies will come looking for me." The stranger turned his gaze to the far wall, an unpleasant smile on his face. "But they won't find me, I'm not the one who brought us across the border; it was you. They'll find you through the traces you left in the Veil, and they'll get my location out of you if they have to kill every one of your friends and family to do so. If I'm back in the Outlands, they won't bother with you anymore. Come get me here the night after tomorrow at the time the moon rises."

Then there was silence.

With a faint click that sounded too loud, Kimura hit the Stop on a small recorder. "He'll speak for
awhile like that, and then he won’t say anything more. Ujiie-san, did you understand him?"

"Not a word," said Ryou, perfectly composed.

Kimura waited, eyes flickering from Ryou to the stranger and back, but since neither of them added anything, and Yuki was starting to shift and frown in the background, he eventually opened the door and led them out.

"That was a very odd language. I’ve not heard anything like it before," said Yuki, fingers tapping against the plastic casing of the drink dispenser as he waited for his coffee. "Though I almost thought I caught a word or two of Latin in there."

Kimura looked at him in surprise. "You know Latin, doctor?"

"A number of our Japanese terms in surgery and medicine come from Latin via the west, I learned a little of it to help me memorize them. I’m probably mistaken though; I didn’t actually understand any of what he said."

"I couldn’t make heads or tails of it either, so I passed the tapes to a language and encryption expert at the NPA Research center. At first he thought it was very, very bad Latin." Kimura took a sip of his tea. "But when I sent him more samples, he said it more closely resembled antique Persian, of all things. He sent it to one of his university acquaintances who studies dead languages. The professor listened to it and sent me an email demanding to know what kind of joke this was."

"Did they actually understand what he said?" Ryou asked carefully, thinking of the tape in Kimura's pocket.

"No. I asked the professor, of course, but it's a language that doesn't really exist and the tongue it borrows from is as dead as a doornail. I touched base with him shortly before seeing you this evening. He was going on about a bastard form of—..." Kimura flipped open his phone, thumb-scrolled around and read off, "a form of Avestan stripped of its sibilants - I think that's what that kanji means - with pronunciation and some conjugation borrowed from vulgar Latin. He suggested it was a hoax by an ancient languages student who hadn't done his homework well enough. Odd, isn't it?" Once more a flick of a glance at Ryou, though it was Yuki, staring at the detective with a hand outstretched towards a forgotten cup of coffee, that gave him the better reaction.

"But...why would anyone go to that kind of trouble?" Yuki asked, finally rescuing his cup to let a couple of orderlies use the machine.

"That's what we hope to find out," said Kimura, walking away to a spot of the cafeteria that had no nearby ears.

"I suppose he could be a linguist, like your professor- but then what the hell was he doing getting beaten up here in Tokyo?"

Kimura spread his free hand in a gesture that meant he had no comment. This did not stop Yuki from speculating aloud as he walked them back to Ryou's room, in and around Kimura's polite interjections and remarks about discretion. Ryou was the only one who was silent. Persian, Latin, whatever, it didn't matter; when the stranger talked, Ryou could understand every word he said as if he were speaking in perfectly ordinary Japanese. That, and the monsters last night, the terrible rift in space, the snow and the wall, were all telling him one thing.

He was going to have to figure out when the moon was due to rise on Friday.
Bear with me, friends and fellow Romans, as I figure out how to set up chaptered stories in a series in AO3. Expect occasional changes to the structure, though chapters should remain readable (I hope). Chapters should post every 2-3 days unless work/life goes bananas or until I catch up and am starting to post entirely new chapters.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Ryou, a relentlessly repressed and controlled accountant, accidentally slips between dimensions. Since he's a practical, cautious man and not a complete idiot, he retraces his steps and slips right back out again. But he's not alone. And now his life is going to take a sharp turn away from "repressed" and "controlled", to very strange places indeed: into a warped image of the past and into a very uncertain future, through war and violence, to the very edges of reality and beyond.

Ryou walked into the hospital wing, dressed in his usual business suit and carrying his briefcase. He looked around until he spotted a nurse he recognized and waved at her, bringing her around the reception desk and right up to the sign stating that visiting hours were over.

"Hello, I believe we met two days ago, I'm Ujiie Yuki's older brother."

"Oh yes, Ujiie-san. Is everything alright? Ujiie-sensei isn't here tonight."

"I know, he's at our family house for dinner. I'm late myself. But I forgot some important documents in my room the other day. My brother put them on top of his locker near the emergency ward. He was supposed to bring them tonight, but he forgot. Would it be okay if I went in and fetched them?"

Of course it was okay. The nurse knew who Ujiie-sensei was and, by extension, who Ryou was. There was an automatic feeling of deference, of maintaining a polite distance from his affairs. A man of Ryou's circle in society could walk out with a gallon of blood in a barrel and someone would hold the door for him. At least that was true in this hospital. The police would be far less understanding, and Ryou was well aware of that.

What I'm doing is insane, he told himself for the hundredth time, but he still hit the elevator button that would lead him to the Intensive Care unit, the badge the nurse had handed him clipped to his jacket.

So far, nothing Ryou had done could give the police anything to pin on him. Oh, he knew his story was far from above suspicion, but there was nothing there that could lead to even a whiff of an indictment for anything. The Nissan had obviously been in an accident, but just as obviously from the brick dust in the dents, the collision had not been with another vehicle or a pedestrian. The police had shown no signs of doubting Ryou's story of crashing into the debris of a construction site, and he was pretty sure there was no forensic means available to determine the debris was in motion and hostile at the time. The man he'd brought back was certainly in bad shape, but Ryou had been the one to call the ambulance and help him, and the man had in no way accused Ryou of anything. The whole not-speaking-Japanese thing was more of a problem than a bonus, since it'd aroused Kimura's curiosity and his suspicions. It was too bizarre, it didn't go with the rest of the picture. But it was still nothing that could get Ryou into trouble. He might have the police scrutinizing his otherwise efficient and meticulous life, and the president would undoubtedly not be happy about any of this, but there was nothing so far that would not blow over within a few days or weeks.

Getting into the hospital under false pretences to help a paperless foreigner and potential criminal break out...This was something he could probably be arrested and fined for, which wouldn’t look too
good on the résumé of a financier.

This was insane, he knew it. It just wasn't as insane as everything that had happened two nights ago. Neither was it as dangerous. Ryō's relationship with his family was a little on the formal side, it went with their position in life, it was natural and expected. But he would never want to see any harm befall them, or Sasaki or any of his office workers who might qualify under the term 'friend'. He'd like to believe the foreigner was lying about the danger Ryō and his entourage was in, but he just did not think he could afford to. Ryō dealt with facts, statistics and risk assessments, not hopes and delusions.

He'd had Yuki show him around the surgical ward and the Intensive Care unit yesterday, before Ryō discharged himself. Yuki had seemed startled and suspicious that Ryō might want to see his little brother's workplace, but he'd complied, and even spent all of his lunch break taking Ryō around and talking about his work here. Ryō had rather wished he'd thought to ask his brother to do this years ago, and not for the current underhanded reasons...Ryō had already called Sasaki that morning and asked that his assistant drop off some non-confidential information on Noruma. He'd left it in his room after leaving the hospital, calling Yuki thirty minutes later from his condo to make sure some industrious cleaner did not pitch out Ryō's alibi. He'd called after Yuki's shift and sure enough, his busy brother had forgotten the papers, giving Ryō the perfect excuse to drop by on his way home. If any part of this elaborate setup had fallen through, Ryō had a fall-back plan ready to explain his presence at the hospital here tonight, involving attacking the sutures on his forehead with a knife if need be. Ryō had this part all organized. What he would say to the police tomorrow morning when they determined he'd been in the hospital when their mysterious foreigner disappeared...was something he was still working on. At present it involved too many variables.

Ryō grabbed the folder from the top of Yuki's locker; it looked like his sutures were safe, which was good, they'd hurt enough last night. They'd have kept him awake if the thought of trash-made monsters attacking his parents hadn't already done the trick. Then he made his way towards the foreigner's room as calmly as if he was visiting the place with his brother at his side. If someone asked, he'd just gotten turned around looking for the elevator. Fortunately the stranger's room was near the locker area. But there was almost certainly going to be a problem when he got there: the policeman guarding the door.

It turned out the policeman wasn't there.

Ryō believed in that amount of blind luck even less than he believed in hopes and delusions. The policeman would have been Ryō's biggest hurdle, but now another one had presented itself in its place. He knew what this meant. It meant the foreigner had been transferred out of Intensive Care and into another less specialized room. Damn it... It'd been a possibility all along, rooms anywhere on this ward were in high demand. Ryō had even tried to think of a way of asking Yuki about it when his brother had phoned him today for an update on Ryō's health, but he could not find a way of doing so that might not arouse his brother's suspicions and get him involved.

The door was open a crack, but the room was dark beyond it. Now what? thought Ryō, staring at the dark crack. Go through the hospital floors above until he found a room with a policeman in front of it? The chances of passing that off with some excuse were minimal. The chances of getting caught before he could actually find the foreigner were non-negligible too. But if he didn't-

The door whisked open. A hand grabbed Ryō by a fistful of jacket and yanked him in.

Ryō gasped- fingers invaded his mouth, forcing his jaw wide open to the point of pain, while a thumb pressed into his Adam's apple, pinning him back against someone's shoulder. He could barely make more than a choking sound. His briefcase fell to the floor with a clunk.
"It is you, magian." The words were low next to his ear. "I wasn't sure. Silence, there is someone sleeping in here."

Ryou was released. He staggered a few feet, hands at his throat, gasping for air. When he turned around, the stranger was closing the door softly, with a last quick look around outside.

"You're late, the moon is up already. Then again, I was late too. They took me up to another room with a lift. I wasn't sure they'd have hands working the cables at this time of night, so I had to find some stairs to get back here."

"Uh," said Ryou. It was the only thing that came to mind.

There was someone in the bed, a very, very old person - man or woman, he could not tell - hooked up to a respirator, unconscious or sleeping. There was only a faint light above the bed to allow nurses to check for vitals. Ryou righted his glasses and turned back once more towards the foreigner, who was leaning against the door, holding his side with an unthinking gesture. He was still pale, cheeks and eyes sunken, but that feeling of fierce will was all the greater now, and he seemed pleased to be out of bed and moving about.

"What-" Ryou cleared his throat and rubbed at the ache. "How did you get past the policeman? Was he still there?"

"The guard they had on me? I disposed of him."

Ryou's blood turned to ice. "You-...What did you do?!"

"Shhh. He'll be fine as long as your Inlander skulls are no more fragile than the norm. I tied him up in my sheets and put him on my bed. The women here check me once a night, so they'll find him before the sun rises. Considerably before, even, so can we leave now?"

This really is insane, Ryou thought, but once more it seemed his mind was somewhere else, in a place where mundane thoughts stacked up to wait their turn while facts were processed first.

"Yes, let's leave. My car is outside."

"That's the vehicle we were in before?"

"Not the same one," said Ryou, shoving up his glasses and dismissing thoughts of his Nissan, now thoroughly junked.

"Can't you get me across the border here?"

"What?"

The foreigner seemed to want to add more, but interrupted himself with a sharp gesture. "Never mind. There are sick people in this place. Let's not take a chance we'll bring the Bher Rajin down on their heads. Let's go." He reached for the doorknob, then gave the hand Ryou had put on his hospital shirtsleeve a surprised look.

Ryou held up the piece of paper he'd prepared beforehand. "Here," he said in the voice he used for interns, temps and other people who needed careful instructions to keep them out of trouble. "This is a floor-plan of this ward with the stairs marked with an arrow, here. It sounds like you already know where they are. You're going to go down the stairs one floor and out the door. You'll have to hit a bar-"
The man was scowling at the paper. "We're not leaving together?"

"No. I have my reasons," said Ryou, who wasn't about to explain surveillance cameras to a man who thought elevators were pulled up and down manually.

Their eyes met, a test of wills. The stranger stared at Ryou with the look of a man who shoved swords through things and was used to having his orders obeyed, rather than receiving them. It was formidable, and if Ryou wasn't busy with cold, hard facts right now, he might have been intimidated. As it were, he was now dealing with the fact that this man had assaulted a police officer and had dropped Ryou into so much trouble that even the president's friends in the Diet were going to be helpless to handle this one. It was probably too late, but Ryou was going to do as much damage control as he could, and this person's stubbornness was a fact that Ryou was going to rub right out of the equation if the brute wanted his help at all.

The foreigner looked away first, with a faint twitch to his lips which was either irritation or amusement. "Very well. What do I do to that door you told me about?"

"You'll push the bar to open it. A very loud bell will start up. Don't worry about it, go straight out the door as fast as you can and across the car park - the flat bit outside, and straight to where there are trees. Go through the trees until you see a fence. My car will be on the other side. I'll help you over the fence."

"How high is it?"

"I don't know," said Ryou, rubbing his forehead next to the bandages over his sutures. "I think I can reach the top if I stretch, and you're an inch taller."

"The day I need help getting over that, you can bury me, magian. Let's go."

Ryou gripped the sleeve even harder. "Don't hurt anybody else," he hissed.

"Fine, fine. The stairs were empty before, I should be able to get out without being seen. If not, it's been years since I've struck a woman and I have no intention of doing so now. As for the men in this place, they're weeds. They'll leave me alone if they know what's good for them."

"You'll leave them alone if you know what's good for you," said Ryou in the same measured intern-reserved voice.

That got him the look again, and the same quirky smile. "Fine. It's your world, Inlander."

Facts could not be dismissed; that was not the way they worked. But they could - had to be - prioritized. So Ryou took the facts - 'your world', and the reiterated evidence that all of this really was truly insane - and dropped them into the stack of things he'd deal with once this evening was over and done with for good.

"I'm leaving now," he said. "Wait ten minutes- wait until that black stick on the round face over there has reached that area there. Then go."

"I know what a clock is," said the stranger with heavy patience touched with acid. "My country trades with Ras Dal Aran regularly."

"So you won't get it wrong, then," said Ryou, picking up his briefcase and stepping out the door.
Ryou stopped the car alongside the curb and took stock. So far so good. There'd been no signs of anything unusual happening in the hospital as he'd made his way out. He'd handed the badge back to the nurse near reception, and chatted about his health for a minute. He felt confident that she'd later testify that his attitude had been perfectly normal (only Yuki and Ryou's parents would know that Ryou chatting about his health was anything but normal right there). There was still a lot that was going to link him to tonight's escapade, but nothing solid enough to stand up in court which, thanks to that barbarian's handling of the situation with the policeman, was where this was now going to end up. There was still a chance this might all blow over as long as Ryou could get the man out of the reach of the Tokyo Metro police and back where he belonged. Ryou glanced at his watch for the third time, tilting his wrist to catch the light of the streetlamp without releasing his tight grip on the steering wheel.

Movement at the periphery of his vision caught his attention. Hands had grasped the top railing circling the hospital's brick perimeter, which was fortunately more decorative than formidable.

The foreigner hauled himself up, swung over the rail and landed on his feet on the other side. He straightened up slowly and leaned back against the wall, arms clasping his side. Idiot, thought Ryou, jerking off his seatbelt; he should not have believed the man wouldn't need help.

By the time he got the driver's door open, the stranger was at the passenger side and approaching the problem of the handle via the 'twist it everyway until it gives' method.

"Are you okay?" Ryou asked, fastening his seatbelt again out of habit.

"The bell didn't ring," said the stranger, settling down into the seat of the rental with a grimace of pain.

It took Ryou a second to figure out what he was talking about. "Oh? Our building's fire exit is wired to an alarm, so I thought-" but maybe the hospital's alarm was silent. Even if there wasn't any, there was no need to linger. Ryou started the car and pulled away from the curb quickly, making his passenger clutch at the door and side of his seat in alarm.

One street away, Ryou was back in traffic and heading away from the hospital. The background noise of engines, brakes and a distant honk was staggeringly prosaic in this context. Ryou found himself glancing to the left to make sure he still had some foreign fighter from another world in his passenger seat. Then he gave his head a sharp shake. The sheer volume of things he did not know could easily overwhelm him if he let it, so he’d decided yesterday, while organizing this insanity, that he was going to stick to the steps of his plan, concentrating first and foremost on anything pertinent to his family’s safety and getting this man home.

"I'm going to drive you back to where I've found you. Unless you think that thing is still waiting for you?"

"The Behr Rajin? No, it will have wandered off. Of course, that doesn't mean we might not wander right into it either. Do you have a weapon I can use?"

"No," said Ryou shortly.

"Let's hope it went chasing the moon, then," said the stranger, putting his hands behind his head in a casual stretch. Then he dropped his arms back down and clasped his side. Ryou noticed a small stain
of blood seeping through the hospital top.

"You have a bag at your feet. There's clothes in there," he said.

The foreigner grunted and picked up the bag. He stared at the zip for a few seconds. Fortunately a stoplight turned red up ahead and Ryou was able to reach over and get his sport's bag open before anything violent happened to it.

His passenger fingered the grey material of the sweatshirt with an air of surprise before pulling it on carefully. Ryou debated the wisdom of discussing seatbelts, and then decided to drive extra carefully rather than work his way through that.

The man beside him made a startled noise. Ryou glanced away from the road to see his passenger lift the two arm guards from the bag.

"I thought I'd lost them," the man said softly.

"No, I had to throw away the rest of your armour while you were unconscious, sorry. But you came to when I took those off and you got very agitated, you wouldn't let go of them. Then you passed out again. I, ah, put them in my briefcase." God knows what he'd have told the police if they'd decided to search his things. It hadn't been very wise, but seeing the desperation in the glazed eyes, the weakened fingers plucking helplessly at his hand to stop him from removing the bracer he'd been untying...Ryou couldn't just leave them in the dumpster.

The stranger was silent for the length of a few streetlamps.

"My brother gave me these. He had them made specifically. They mean a lot to me. I thank you." It was a tone far removed from the one he'd used until now. Ryou glanced at him discreetly, but his face was in the shadows.

"It was nothing, please, do not-"

"They'll get me on my feet faster, too," added the man in a more practical tone, pointing at the signs etched into the metal. "Your Inland ointments and draughts are quite good, but these were made in the Temple of Hygeia itself; Her sigils will insure my wound stays clean and heals fast and true."

"Good," said Ryou, dropping the entirety of that sentence to the bottom of his priority list because he wasn't sure where else to put it right now, and he didn't need another headache.

The stranger fastened on the bracers. They covered him from the wrist halfway up the forearm, two articulated half-cylinders perforated on the edges where a leather thong laced them shut. Ryou had studied them last night, when he'd remembered them and fetched them from out of his briefcase. Their outer design was simple, copper colour with an edge of lighter yellow, each decorated with a circle of beaten yellow metal divided by a crescent line, the picture of a moon both waxing and full. The inner face had been more heavily decorated with engraved lines in concentric circles enclosing etched symbols; Ryou had thought it odd at the time that the inside of the pieces of armour were more decorated than the outside, but apparently there was some, ah, religious significance to that.

Their owner tightened the bracers, fitting them into place with a gesture that seemed to satisfy him with its familiarity. Then he fished around the bag some more, and Ryou realized he was going to have to explain the concept of sneakers.

They turned out to be two sizes too big despite Ryou's best estimates. This was going to just be one of those evenings.
"They're better than those ridiculous slippers at any rate," said the stranger with a shrug. Then he poked curiously at the rubber sole. "You Inlanders do have some odd things. I'd heard of these vehicles that ride by themselves, and the towers made of windows. But even ordinary things like shoes are extraordinary here. I've never seen leather like this before, is it covered in some kind of resin?"

"No. It's a-...it's...a material like plastic. You probably won't know what it is." Neither did Ryou, exactly, when it came down to it.

Silence settled between them. Ryou had too many questions to ask, and was afraid the answers would further shake his view of the world. The stranger looked out the window at the passing buildings for awhile and maybe he felt the same way, because though Ryou frequently caught him frowning or craning his neck to see some detail of the cityscape, he didn't ask any question either.

But when Ryou took a turn and drove down the main street that would take them to that sector full of Mah-jong parlours, he noticed his passenger had started to study him with the same attention as the city, eyes traveling over his body with frank curiosity. Ryou said nothing.

"I heard you people did not have any real warriors, but that your weapons fight for you," said the stranger, the words abrupt after nearly half an hour of silence. "Do Inlanders really have swords that can bring down lightning on a man's head from a clear sky?"

"No, for pretty much all of those statements," said Ryou, after a few seconds of consideration.

"Oh. I had the feeling our storytellers were making half of it up...Pity...Then again, I'm just a simple soldier. I'll stick to what I know. You don't even have a knife with you?"

"No, I apologize, but I don't."

"You live dangerously, Inlander," said the man in a tone that suggested he half approved of the notion.

"You could be right, though I never thought so before last Tuesday."

Ryou frowned and slowed down. Talking had distracted him. He wasn't that sure of his destination anyway. He'd been driving away from Shore and heading south three nights ago, but his mind had been on the Noruma account, not on accidentally slipping into different worlds. Still, this neighbourhood didn't look familiar. He'd gone too far.

Ryou hooked a left four times and eventually drove at ten miles per hour through an intersection that looked exactly like the others. Then he pulled up at the curb on the other side of the stoplight.

"We're here," said Ryou, and his tension was enough to spill over in to his voice now. He hadn't known what he'd find here, he hadn't been able to plan this part at all. And now, faced with a completely ordinary street in an ordinary neighborhood...suddenly the rest of the evening looked a lot less straightforward than he'd like.

"I'll take your word for it," said the stranger, looking around with curiosity that would suit a tourist.

Ryou pressed his lips together. That had not been the answer he'd been hoping for, though a part of him had expected it somehow. He drew a deep breath, ready to broach the subject that was now going to dominate the evening- then he exhaled abruptly as the "Opening Soon!" sign emblazoned across the storefront of a tobacconist, magazine and manga shop caught his attention. It was on the
other side of the street, partially hidden by a construction site wall of honeycombed brick and stretches of metal sheeting. A mailbox that looked no more derelict than any other in the city stood on the curb. It was all alien and yet intensely familiar nonetheless. This was on the side of the street Ryō had been going down that night, though, not in the street perpendicular to it. To crash into that, he would have had to somehow turned the car around ninety degrees without noticing. Ryō felt a wave of dizziness sweep him and he rubbed his eyes hard.

When he righted his glasses again, he found the stranger watching him.

"We're definitely here," said Ryō. "What happens now?"

His companion did not appear in the least bit surprised by the question. "You don't know, do you," he stated. "I was pretty damn sure you weren't a border crosser, that much was obvious. That night you met me was your first time breaking through the Veil, wasn't it."

"...What?"

"I figured. Now I'm really surprised you got us back, magian. I've been told it's ten times harder in that direction. But right here and now, you don't have a clue. Is that right?"

The facts, the whole trend of this evening, were circling Ryō like a noose. When the stranger had said 'get me back across the border', it seemed driving the getaway car wasn't what he'd had in mind. Ryō had known it on some level, but he'd had too hard a time accepting that preposterous notion.

"I...why are you claiming that I am the one who is responsible for getting in and out of that- that- whatever that place was?"

"Who else? Inder help us," his passenger added with a feral grin, "you don't think a guy like me gets all that mystical shit, do you? All I remember is the onion."

"The onion?" Ryō echoed perplexidly.

"That's how my tutor tried to explain the Lore of Zaratusra to me, back when I was eight. I didn't give a damn back then, I've managed not to give a damn these past seventeen years and I'd have gladly continued not to give a damn if those fucking imperial lackeys-. Just get me back, magian. You did it before, you can do it again. Hell, just drop me off in the no man's land and I'll find someone to bribe or beat up until they take me the rest of the way."

In Ryō's head, the words 'I don't know how!' clashed with 'You did it before'. It appeared that was true; he'd crossed by himself last time, even if he had no idea how. And now Ryō had to do it again. His life and the safety of his family depended on getting rid of the stranger before those 'rajin' found him. On a lesser degree, but perhaps more immediate, it'd be a help to Ryō's continued freedom and career to conclude all this before the police found one of their own trussed up in the hospital, and followed the trail to the culprit and the accomplice who'd helped him get away.

Ryō started up the car. Maybe if he circled the construction site and the streets around it...? "Besides telling me onions are involved, is there any more information you can give me?" he asked tightly.

The foreigner scratched his chin. He seemed supremely unconcerned about Ryō's ignorance, which was odd for a man who had just as much at stake.

"Sure, if it helps you, I'll tell you the little I know. The greater world according to Lore is like an onion. Your world is the green bit at the very center; it's enclosed by the Great Veil. The Outlands
are the layers. The husk around the onion would be- let's not talk about that when we're about to border-walk, that'd be bad luck." He gave the streets around them a dark look as if he actually expected something to materialize on cue. "It's easy enough to travel through the outer layers, now that the trail is blazed. But only a magian can build new routes, or travel between Inlands and the Outlands. That's easy to understand, right? I got that bit back when I was eight."

Ryou turned left without deigning to answer that. He passed by the metal gate through which he'd driven the Nissan into the construction site last Tuesday. In this version of Tokyo, it was padlocked in two places in deference to the neighborhood.

A car passed them with a rev of motor. Ryou was still driving too slowly, looking around and trying to figure out what to do next, even though he possessed not a tenth of the information required to make even an educated guess. Onion layers. Right. That made it all clear.

"So how do I go from my layer to yours?"

The stranger was staring once more out the window in fascination at the sights of buildings, streetlights, water mains, gutters, neons. "Hmm? You need the Lore: the knowledge inherited from the ancient magii, as well as the brain and the will to use them."

"I don't have the knowledge," said Ryou, teeth attempting to clench in frustration and growing tension.

"You must have something. Maybe knowledge isn't required. The blessed Zaratusra pierced the Great Veil, founded the first three countries and broke the curse of Babel, and he didn't inherit any knowledge from the ancients since he was doing it all for the first time. Not that you're that good," the stranger added with a bark of laughter. "But you look like you'd have a good head for all those numbers and arcana the magii use-"

"Numbers?" Ryou said blankly as a slew of facts that hadn't gone near each other previously suddenly tried to fit together.

"That's part of it. Don't ask me more about that. I can elevate a ballista's angle to rain hell on enemy troops and that's as much mathematics as I ever mastered."

Ryou thought he was better off a few minutes ago when he understood none of any of this. Now that he saw a thin thread leading through the ignorance...now it really made no sense to the point that it was distracting him in his driving.

A big American car full of what were probably Yakuza passed him by; the passenger window was open and a bald man leaned out and shouted back at him to sober up. Ryou accelerated instinctively until he was driving at a speed that would not get him noticed as much.

"Okay. Fine. So there's a veil between my world and yours and I need numbers which I do not possess to get across it- " except he had once. How? Ryou glanced around and realized he'd driven more than half a mile away from the construction site. He turned into a small side street and did a u-turn in the deserted road. As he drove back the way he'd come, he decided to tackle it from another angle. "So why is this layer you're talking about here, in this place? There's nothing extraordinary about it." Unless there was some ancient temple here back when this was still Edo, or perhaps leylines or some other Feng Shui crap.

"It's not just here. It's everywhere."

"What do you mean?"
"That's where it gets confusing. To tell you the truth, at that point in the discussion I was half asleep. It was a warm day, and I'd been out riding all morning. According to my tutor, who was a Hellen of respect, mind you, this onion is everywhere. All the time. You can cross the border from Inland to Outland anywhere you want. We could have done it back at the sick-house."

"But that doesn't make any sense. You're saying I'm doing this, crossing this veil."

The stranger nodded categorically in the light of streetlamps. They'd removed the disks plaited in his hair; the end of his thick mane was now a ragged disorderly border of curls that rasped against the material of the sweatshirt when he gestured like that.

"I've lived in Tokyo all my life - not that that matters if what you're saying is true - and I've never crossed this veil before." If mathematics were in any shape or form involved in this process, then Ryou would have spent most of his university years in that limbo. Science had been his only joy back then, in an otherwise arduous coming of age. Especially advanced mathematics. His main aim in university had been to become a financier and accountant, but he'd been so good at those subjects that he'd had the leisure to indulge in one small pleasure that was uniquely his own (the trips to what had been his university equivalent of the Shore bar did not count, they'd been more demeaning than elevating). He'd taken a course in advanced mathematics during his first year. Then another, before progressing to algebraic geometry in the second year. At which point his professor had talked enthusiastically about broadening his degree and aiming for a master's and a PhD, and Ryou had stopped and gone back to studying only finance and statistics.

A motorbike zoomed by on a side street, going the other way, followed by three others all going way too fast. Their tires squealed as they turned a corner behind them. Hoodlums, thought Ryou automatically.

"...Ai, magian, watch where you're going."

Higher mathematics. The elegance of leaving the plodding three dimensions behind to enter a realm that had no limit. Numbers embraced an elegant and ever-expanding array of dimensions. An infinity of layers.

The onion is everywhere.

No, that just didn't make any-

"Magian!"

The driver side window bulged inward with an ugly crunch.

Ryou jerked on the wheel and the rented Honda careened towards the sidewalk. Something went thud against the back passenger side. Ryou jerked the wheel the other way and forced the car to go straight again.

He glanced wildly into the rear-view mirror. Behind the car, a motorcyclist had hit the ground and was rolling into the gutter. There were four other bikers on the road who'd shot past the fallen man without a glance, and one more in front of the car, now swerving back.

They were all carrying metal bars or baseball bats.

Ryou hit the accelerator, driving right past the man up ahead before the latter could react. Then he glanced at his side window, just to confirm it. Yes, it'd been slugged, the glass a crazy star pattern, though it hadn't shattered.
Something hit the back of the car with a whack. Ryou drove faster. There weren't any other cars on the road, which was so dark in his headlamps he could barely—...

...make it...out...

No streetlamps. No lit streetlamps. Just the headlights of the Honda and the motorcycles and the moon above them as they rushed through deserted, derelict streets powdered with snow.

"We’re back in the no man’s land," Ryou said tightly. The road was as unkempt as the rest. His teeth and bones were rattling as the wheels hit cracks and debris.

"Looks that way," was the lackadaisical answer, shouted to get over the noise of the car.

Despite the way it shook them up, the state of the road was in their favor; the motorcycles were having an even harder time of it. They weren’t powerful machines; if his recollection of the split-second glance in the rear-view mirror was correct, two of them were mopeds.

"Who the hell are they?"

"Border crossers," said the stranger, looking back over his shoulder. "Defending their territory, or just looking to loot. Okay, this is good enough. Try to get ahead of them a bit, and then let me out."

"What?!"

One of the bikes surged ahead. The rider swiped his club at Ryou’s headlights in passing and missed. They weren’t shouting or hooting like hooligans, and they weren’t signaling him to stop or slow down. Everything was too bumpy and fast for Ryou to get a good look at their pursuers beyond the fact that they were armed and not wearing any helmets, but he could feel their intent. They knew what they wanted, and he would eventually be made to comply in time. The way they tailed him, nipping in and out for a strike, reminded him of a pack of wolves harrying a caribou on a nature program.

"Let me out when you can," the foreigner repeated. "I'll deal with the scum. They're small fry."

"They're **armed**!" Ryou turned a corner, slewing over debris.

"They're still small fry. Let me out, and then get back to the Inlands." In the small light from the dashboard, his grin was feral and without fear, but Ryou could see him holding his side as they were both jolted and shaken by the car’s speed. He didn’t even have his sword anymore—

**Do you have a weapon I can use?**

"Okay, I get it," said Ryou and hit the accelerator. The stranger gasped, grabbing the door and the seat, and then he laughed in savage pleasure at their speed and their crazy bouncing, the sound broken into staccatos by the vibrations.

Ryou pounded the car through the empty streets, creeping ahead. Buildings flashed by, along with the occasional wreck of a car abandoned alongside the road. Behind him, one of the bikers skidded and fell, his headlight wobbling and jerking sideways to spin in the road. Still four of them left. Ryou turned a corner on what felt like two wheels, though that was probably his imagination. Since he’d shown up at the rental agency without booking any car beforehand, they’d not had many available, certainly not any reasonably priced ones. Ryou had been in a hurry and too focused on his plans to politely argue and negotiate, and the woman at the counter had sensed that and struck like a shark scenting blood in the water. The FD2 she'd managed to offload on him had been abominably expensive, with more power and weight by far than his old Nissan, and Ryou hoped he’d be able to
return it to the agency with his most heartfelt thanks, as well as a visa card for the damages.

His passenger was shouting at him, something about stopping now. Ryou gritted his teeth and accelerated instead. After a minute, the stranger stopped trying to object, and split his time staring at the road rushing by and at Ryou’s profile.

Two more abrupt turns and the bikers could no longer see them. They would certainly be able to hear the Honda roaring through the deserted streets, but Ryou counted on the echo effect from these old, empty buildings to make that too confusing to follow. He continued to dart and weave through side alleys to further muddy the trail, not caring that he was now thoroughly lost. What did it matter that he couldn’t find his way back to the construction site, since the bloody onion was everywhere.

Ryou glanced at the rear-view mirror to make sure the manic thread of thought hadn’t made it onto his features. His reflection glanced back at him, cool, collected and as distant as always. Good. Show them nothing. Now what he needed was...There. That building, and a ramp leading up to a covered parking area.

The Honda crunched its way up the concrete incline to the first floor. It wasn’t much more elevated than the street, and the sides were open but for a railing. Far from perfect, but it gave them some cover. Ryou unclenched one hand from the steering wheel and switched off the ignition.

The silence was deafening. Both of them sat there as if unwilling to be the first to break it.

"So, who were they?" Ryou finally asked.

"Border crossers," was the dismissive answer. "They thrive on the border between Inland and Out. They're exiles, or just plain scum. Each band has a hedge wizard who'll poke them across the border from Outlands to this no man's land where the law and the bounty hunters won't risk going. Eventually their mucking around will either rouse the Per Gathas to raid them or bring down the Furies on their heads, and the world will be a better place for seeing a dozen whoreson losers get flayed. How do I open this?" The stranger was pawing at the door. The handle was molded in the same plastic as the armrest; he was ineffectually pulling at the window lock switch and pushing at the glass.

"You knew they'd be there."

The stranger stopped his efforts and looked around at Ryou.

Ryou put both his hands on the steering wheel and flexed his fingers on the plastic. "You said we can cross anywhere. There was no point letting me drive all the way back here if that was true, we could have done it ten minutes away from the hospital. But I did not cross anywhere; not today, nor the last time either. I wasn't even trying to do anything special the first time I crossed, and in a huge area of deserted city that seems to stretch as far as Tokyo does, I ended up a few feet away from you. That's too big a coincidence. Same tonight, I ended up right next to them. You knew they'd be there, that we'd meet them if we crossed, and that we'd get attacked. That's why you wanted a weapon. Behind all this onion nonsense and 'I'm just a simple soldier', you're actually quite smart, aren't you."

The stranger's lips quirked. "Not half as smart as you are. You don't seem to be all that mad," he added curiously, cocking his head to examine Ryou in the near-total darkness inside the car. He did not seem in the least remorseful at getting caught out.

Ryou had the feeling that he should be furious, but it didn't seem to matter. It was just one more fact to add to the equation. It might even be considered reassuring that one of them had a modicum of control over events. At any rate, he was too used to being intellectual rather than emotional by now.
"I didn't know they'd be here for sure, but chances were good," his companion said, settling back down into the seat. "And you're right. I don't know how the Lore works or anything, but I don't think Inlanders, even smart ones, accidentally stumble into the no man's land because they tripped over a rock and fell into it headfirst. I think you got through because the Rajin had ripped up all the layers to get at me. Or because the fucking Imperials did the same to put me there in the first place. Of course I could be wrong; maybe Inder just decided it was not my day to die and He sent you to save the life of this favored child of war. Won't be the first time He's come through for me. I was hoping He'd give me a hand again tonight. And once we got across, it was a fair bet we'd find the jackals here. A magian tearing through the Great Veil leaves traces even those little poppy-smoking wizards can follow. They've been here for days I bet, digging around, trying to figure out how you did it and if they can follow. Maybe they even got through already, and we ran into the rearguard defending the entrance from other gangs. It's their motherload, to find a weak place where they can get Inland, letting them pillage and then make their escape where your soldiers can never find them. An Inland artifact is worth its weight in gold, even when it stops working. It'd keep them in drink and whores for a year."

Ryou gave him a long look. "And you want to deal with these people to get home?"

The stranger snorted. "They're not dangerous. They're a good deal less dangerous to either of us than the people who are after me, at any rate. For starters, this riff-raff won't be able to follow your tracks once you cross the Great Veil; they don't have anything like those abilities. Get back Inland, and you'll be fine."

"Didn't you want me to get you to the Outlands proper?" said Ryou, and wondered why he was objecting...

"That'd be safer," said his companion, and then he immediately corrected himself with a gesture of self-directed irritation. "That'd be safer for me, that is. But let's face it, magian, you've got guts and skills, but you know less about the Lore of Zaratusra than I do, and I told you how much that was in less than fifty words. Maybe you can't even get me to the Outlands as you are. I can cut a deal with the jackals; I'll offer to pay them if I can't beat some sense into their heads."

Pay them what? Ryou almost asked, knowing full well that the only thing inside the foreigner's jogging pants was a price tag, but then he saw his companion absently twist the bracer on his left arm...The way their owner had talked about them, they were probably worth a lot of money. This was a fact, which gave rise to a possible option, but Ryou found he didn't like it much, and he had the feeling the Outlander would like it still less and would take risks to avoid that extreme.

His passenger removed his hand from the bracer as if realizing it'd been noticed, and made shooing gestures at Ryou instead. "I'll be fine. You should worry about yourself. Just tell me how to open this damned door and then get out of here, you don't want to have to deal with those pitiful-"

The word 'losers' was lost in the crash of the back window exploding.

"-the hell?!" shouted Ryou's companion. As for Ryou, he'd already turned the key and hit the accelerator, drowning out the echoes of a shot lingering in the garage's enclosed space.

"Change of plans," said Ryou tightly, back in a world of cold facts where adrenaline was a distant distraction.

"What kind of- was that a musket?!"

"No, I'm pretty sure that was a gun," said Ryou, not bothering to wonder why his passenger knew about firearms at all.
"Hell. They must have gotten it in an Inland raid. These little shits are a cut above the usual scum. Whoa-" he grabbed at the door handle as Ryou shot down the ramp and turned into the street. "Wait-wait, magian, let me out!"

"They'll kill you," said Ryou, accelerating.

"They won't! We're worth nothing to them dead!" shouted his companion over the roar of the motor.

There were headlights in the rear-view mirror. Their glare hid the full picture of the vehicle following them, but it looked like some kind of souped-up jeep or a dune-buggy. Something that would have considerably less problems than the Honda negotiating the ruins. Above the smear of light, Ryou spotted the silhouette of a man holding a rifle...

He shook off the hand grasping his wrist.

"Stop!" his passenger yelled. "Let me out and go! I can't pay for your life if they catch us now. A magian who can go Inland so easily is worth too much for them-"

Above the howl of the motor and the rapid-fire thuds of the wheels grinding over grit, Ryou thought he heard another shot. They'd be aiming for the tires. The bullet through the back window had been a warning shot.

"Inlander, go home!"

Ryou accelerated; in his hand, the wheel jerked and was responding only occasionally. The other car was gaining on them anyway.

*Go home.*

The FD2 ran over a large stone, causing the whole vehicle to jolt and slew in the road before Ryou managed to right it again. The other car and the man with the rifle was only thirty yards behind them now, but at this rate Ryou and the stranger were going to die in a car crash in the middle of a wasteland before they could be caught...

He had the Noruma account to deal with this weekend, the price of being ill on a workday. And he was missing the family dinner tonight.

"Magian!

Go home to his career, an eventual marriage, discreet trips to Shore, the total absence of anything extraordinary in his life.

The thoughts of his obligations felt irrelevant, as if he was glancing through last year's schedule. They were facts, but they no longer touched him. Because Ryou had set foot on a path when he'd chosen to drive the Nissan back into the construction site three nights ago. The path had led him to this moment now, it was all crystal clear and so logical.

This time he heard the shot. Something pinged against the back of the car.

"Shit! Hey, magian-"

He could still stop now and turn away. That's what he'd always done up until now when the path of his life had taken a turn that would lead him outside the boundaries of what was expected of him. And to be honest, he'd always gained back in security, respect and ambition what he'd lost of himself in the choice. He could do that now, he should do that now for his own sake and safety as well as his
family's; choose to go back to a life that felt as fake as his Ice Prince expression and forget all this, forget how dream-like and shallow his world had seemed these past three days, forget a smile of fierce freedom and no regrets...

"I am so sorry," said Ryou, though the loved ones he was apologizing to were not here.

The car jolted as the right front tire blew.

Ryou found himself thrown to one side by the strength of the motion. His foot hit the brake automatically. The car started to spin.

Shock squeezed his heart, sheer panic, but that was his body, the animal part that wanted to escape death yet did not know how to do what he needed to do. Ryou's mind, by contrast, felt oddly clear. The way ahead was as distinct as the ruined cityscape waltzing around and around the car.

Ryou lifted his foot from the brake and hit the accelerator. The Honda shot forward on a tight curve with a horrid fla-fla-fla-flap of shredded wheel, straight towards a wall, not that that mattered.

There was no sound, no flash of light...

...but the debris-strewn road was suddenly gone. The car was falling through the air instead, the ground a blur his eyes couldn't focus on though it looked frighteningly far in this moment of freefall.

-should have gotten him to put on his seatbelt, Ryou thought as he closed his eyes.

It turned out the ground was closer than it'd looked, and the Honda hit it with an almighty crash. It bounced a few times with a swansong screech of its suspensions. Ryou's foot was glued to the brakes, but they were no longer responding. And this was the second time in a very, very busy week that he was getting all too acquainted with an air bag.

It seemed to take forever for the Honda to roll to a bumpy stop. The destruction of the front wheels - and the front axle with them - had more to do with it than mechanics.

Silence.

Ryou's eyes were still closed. His glasses were cutting into his cheek, but he couldn't seem to move.

From very, very far away, he could hear someone cursing. The sound waxed and waned from Japanese - very crude Japanese - to another language, one full of harsh, odd sounds Ryou didn't think he'd be able to make if he tried. Huh, that must have been what Yuki and Kimura had heard. Ryou had never figured out why he could understand the foreigner, or why he seemed to be losing his grasp on that understanding now.

"Magian?!”

It was that man calling him. The man who'd fought that monster, who'd smiled at Ryou and walked away. Ryou realized that, very deep inside where a part of him was locked away, he'd always wanted to be able to smile like that...

Ryou opened his eyes. His head was twisted sideways, so he could see, over bulges of airbag, a strong arm with a wrist bracer struggling to push its way through.

"Fucking- shit-licking- thing-" "

The arm disappeared. Then there was the crash of a window getting kicked out.
More cursing. Ryou's mind wandered a little, and then his door was wrenched open, letting in a waft of air.

"Magian? You still alive?"

"Yes," said Ryou, since that fact at least was undeniable.

He was gently extracted from the car. The stranger gave the airbag one last vile look, then he helped Ryou to sit down on the dusty ground, leaning him back against the car.

"How are you feeling? You look like shit."

How was he feeling? That was a more complicated question to answer than 'Are you alive'.

"I'm very tired," Ryou eventually said. His mind felt light and empty, which was quite an extraordinary state for him. His body hurt in various places. And he was so drained that even the thought of moving was agony in itself.

Fingers felt him over, righted his glasses in passing. Ryou felt thankful for that. He couldn't have lifted his hand to do it himself, and he couldn't pass his fingers over his features to tell what they looked like...It felt wrong not to be able to check...

The stranger's face was bruised, a trickle of blood running from his lip down to his chin. The concern in his eyes faded as he finished checking Ryou over. With a grunt of pain, he sat down next to Ryou, back against the Honda's rear passenger door, and started rubbing his neck as if it pained him. Probably a touch whiplashed.

The air was starting to stink of gas fumes. Ryou knew he should mention this, but it was too much effort to concentrate on all the moving that would then be required.

"Why is the sun shining?" he finally asked instead.

"Dunno," said the stranger. "We're somewhere where it shines, I guess."

Oh.

The sunlight was hurting Ryou's head, though a big, thick cloud was blocking out most of it. He closed his eyes, and the darkness brought momentary relief.

Slowly, slowly his mind started to function again. They were out of danger. Immediate danger, Ryou corrected himself as the gas fumes filled his nose with an almost solid presence.

...But it wasn't the smell of gas, or the ping of the car settling into a very final heap, or the thought of having leapt outside the boundaries of his life, that was currently taking up a larger and larger part of his thoughts...

Ryou opened his eyes and stared at the cloud again, which wasn't in any way a cloud at all.

Ryou swallowed.

"What is that doing there?" he croaked.

"Hanging there," the stranger answered with an audible shrug.

He was talking about an island. An island in the sky. It was some distance away, so Ryou could see it clearly. It was floating against the whiteness of the firmament which seemed never-ending,
plunging away from them. They were only a hundred yards away from what appeared to be a cliff. Ryou wondered if they were on a floating island as well, and wasn't sure he could handle the answer.

He stared at the landmass again. It was diamond shaped, green on its flat top above bedrock tapering to a point, and it was all in all quite big. And it was indeed hanging there with no visible means of support.

"Did I go crazy?" Ryou asked. It certainly felt like it. Dealing with facts was all well and good, but if he tried to fit that one in, at least a dozen established ones were going to fall out.

"No, you're okay," said the stranger, wearily rubbing the blood from his face with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "We're in the Broken Lands. It's always like that. You took us all the way from the Inlands to- hell, I don't even know how far we are, but we're on the far side of the onion, that's for sure. I take back what I said earlier, my friend. You are as good as Zaratusra. Hell, you're the blessed Path Maker reborn. You just got to learn a whole lot of control and then you can take over the Per Gathas tomorrow."

The words washed by Ryou without much meaning.

"We're going to have an interesting trip ahead of us...But don't worry about that. You need to rest, magian, you're as white as the belly of a fish."

"I..." Ryou stared at the thing floating there. Then he closed his eyes. "We need to get away from the car. Right away."

"Oh? Okay. Hold on."

The stranger slid his arm around Ryou's shoulder and lifted, and Ryou passed out.
Chapter 5

The smell of wood smoke greeted Ryou on his return to consciousness.

Since as far back as he could remember, Ryou had never had the fuzzy transition between sleeping and wakefulness he'd read about in stories. Ryou was either asleep, or he was awake and in full possessions of his faculties such as the memory of crashing the rented Honda through dimensions accompanied by a refugee from the Tokyo police to end up in a place where islands floated through the sky.

Staying asleep was very tempting right now.

The stranger shifted and leaned forward. It seemed Ryou was currently wrapped in a blanket, curled up against the man's chest and with the stranger's legs on either side of him, one bent knee helping to prop him into place. This was a complicated situation that even higher mathematics couldn't adequately handle, and Ryou really wished he could go back to sleep and not deal with it now. He still felt amazingly tired.

The nearby fire crackled as it was prodded, then Ryou's companion leaned back once more, cleared his throat absently and settled down.

Ryou's eyelids opened a crack despite his best intentions.

It was nighttime. Ryou felt a rare impulse of anger, all the stranger for being totally irrational; day, night - make up your mind!

He'd stiffened unconsciously. The man holding him shifted again, this time with intent.

"Magian? You awake?"

"Yes," answered Ryou, instead of asking a few questions of his own, starting with, "Is that ridiculous headache of an island still floating out there?"

"Good, you had me worried there. You've been sleeping half a day and a whole night, or near enough. The moon's about to set."

Ryou focused his eyes at the night around them. Then he squinted and felt at his nose.

"My glasses-"

"Here."

"Oh. Thanks."

Ryou put on his glasses with a shaking hand and looked around. The two of them were leaning against a large rock outcropping which partially sheltered the fire from the night breeze. The blaze was pitiful, one medium-sized branch blackened in its middle with a clump of twigs around it, more smoke than fire. The spots it sullenly warmed on Ryou's hands and face just made the night feel colder. But he was comfortable enough, leaning back against the other man and wrapped in a stiff blanket whose pattern and color looked faintly familiar...Oh right, the back seat cover of the Honda, cut off with a jagged-edged implement by the looks of it. That rental was never going home...

Ryou tried to move, and couldn't, either because of his overtired and sore body or because of the arm
looped around his waist and keeping him where he was. Ryou decided he was too tired to think about that closely.

"Are you hungry?"

Hungry? Come to think of it, there was a faint smell of yakiniku in the air, almost hidden by the prevalence of the smoke.

Ryou stirred. The arm at his waist didn't relinquish its hold, but it tightened and propped him up more. Ryou's companion leaned forward; he was holding a two-foot long metal tube that looked like something from the car's axle, with a sharp bit of metal bound to the end with strips of cut out car-seat cover. The weapon - technically it had to qualify since one could certainly kill with it if one tried, whatever it looked like - nudged a nearby flat rock, bringing Ryou's attention to the lump of what he'd thought was a charred branch upon it.

"Quick little bugger, but I found some good throwing stones and brought him down in one shot," said the man with an air of satisfaction. "Hardly anyone ventures into the Broken Lands, I bet the squirrels around here have never even seen a human before. They let me get too close."

With a twist of perception that turned his stomach along with it, Ryou realized that what he'd thought was a charred twig sprouting from a thick branch was a tiny, well-burnt paw belonging to the bottom half of a rodent.

"I'm not hungry," Ryou managed to say.

"It's probably the strain," the stranger said sympathetically. "You can have it in the morning."

"Right." Ryou had never managed that fuzzy delusion that stopped people from fully comprehending that the meat in their plate had been trotting around some time before, but the notion had never disturbed him either. He was just feeling tired and vulnerable and not really hungry at this moment. By tomorrow morning, the fact that this thing looked like it could crawl away on its own would not bother him at all. No, it would be the notion of badly charred flesh, tiny bones and unsanitary cooking and refrigeration conditions that would see him fast for breakfast.

The fire sparked briefly under a gust of wind. Ryou's eyes were drawn towards the sky, but the moon was behind a bank of what Ryou was going to assume were clouds, and he couldn't make much out. It was darker than any night a Tokyo dweller could even imagine. The stars were prickles forming clouds of light that illuminated nothing. There was only the fire, and the two of them.

"Looks like we're going to be stuck together for awhile," said the man holding him as if their proximity had allowed him to follow Ryou's thoughts. "I don't even know your name. What do they call you back home?"

"I'm sorry, my name is Ujiie," said Ryou, mouth half on automatic. "Ujiie Ryou."

"...Uchee Rio?"

"No, Ujiie- you can call me Ryou, that's my given name," said Ryou, since even the most basic propriety seemed out of place with a small island floating above one's head. "It's written with the character for 'distant', not 'understanding'."

"Whaat?" said the stranger with a chuckle. "Your name's too short to sound like either of those."

"It's-" Ryou glanced around, and then picked up one of the sticks waiting for its turn on the fire. "Here," he said, making scratches in the dirt near their legs. "This is the way my name is written.
This is the more common spelling. And this is mine, with the character for 'distant' right here."

"If you say so," Ryou could hear the smile in the other's voice. "Looks like a bunch of lines to me. So your name is 'distant'?"

"No-"

"Suits you."

"Call me Ryou," said Ryou with a swallowed sigh. "What's your name?"

"My name?" answered his companion as if he hadn't expected the question in return. "Darius," he finally said after a small pause. "Darius Bher Polenius."

"Daris...Berupol...?"

"What? No, Darius Bher- here." The stick was taken from Ryou's fingers. "Darius. Like this. Oh, but I guess you can't read that."

"I can," said Ryou, surprised, looking at the letters scratched into the sand beneath his own name. "It's romaji- roman alphabet."

"It's the Imperium's letters." There was a faint distaste in the tone. "It's spread even to the Inlands, has it? I guess I'm not surprised."

"Darius," Ryou read out. "And the rest?"

The stick scratched idly in the sand, and then Darius leaned forward an inch until his breath tingled along Ryou's ears. "Just call me Darius."

Ryou shivered, suddenly acutely aware of their respective position. He tried to move away casually, but the hand at his waist held him tighter than was required.

"That is three times you've put yourself in harm's way for me, Uchee Ryou. And if I was a better man," Darius added, overriding Ryou's automatic attempt at disclaiming any obligation, "I'd have found a way to stop you. But I didn't, and so here we are."

The breath left Ryou's ear as Darius turned his head to look straight ahead, at the fire or at the night around them.

"It's better if I don't tell you much about myself; I don't want to get you any more mixed up in my mess than you already are, but you've already guessed I'm not the safest guy to be around. I'm involved with something that's bigger than the both of us, and my first duty is to get back to the army and talk to General Terentius. So I won't make any promises I won't keep. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ryou stared at the fire as well. "Yes, you have to get back home."

"That's right. But..." the arm around his waist tightened. "We'll see if we can get you back to yours too."

Silence. Then the branch in the fire popped, sending a tiny spray of stars up towards the heavens.

The hand at Ryou's waist patted him on the hip. "Go to sleep, magian. We've got a long way to walk tomorrow and an even longer way to get to safety."
Ryou nodded, not having anything else to say. Sleep was the best course of action at the present.
When Ryou woke up, he was feeling clear-headed once more. The fact that it was day again didn't
annoy or confuse him this time. On the other hand, he was suddenly conscious of how very
uncomfortable and full of small, sharp rocks the ground beneath him was.

He was lying on his back in the dirt with the cut-out car seat cover over him. The fire was as dead as
the squirrel's lower half, which was still there, complete with a fly scurrying around the haunch.
Somewhere off to the right, high up in the air, the floating island persisted in flouting the laws of
physics.

Ryou felt a sense of surrealism so strong that even the stones poking him through his business suit
trousers didn't feel solid enough to cling to. It was a sensation he'd never had before.

It only lasted a few seconds, then he became aware of what had woken him; a crunch of footsteps
through bracken and thick, dry grass.

"Bad luck, magian," said Darius, coming through the underbrush from the direction of the car.
"Ryou, that is," he added with a crooked grin.

That brought back vivid memories of last night; Darius' breath warm against his ear, the arm around
his waist, the unvarnished words. Ryou remembered how he'd felt, and it banished the sense of
displacement. Yes, he was so far from home that it couldn't even be measured by modern physics,
and his ticket back, his very life, depended on a man who couldn't promise him anything. Ryou had,
following a stupid impulse, lost his world, his family, the very structure of his existence to date. He
was cold, wet with dew, hungry, thirsty and tired, and the only thing he knew about the future was
that it was probably not going to get much better in the immediate and had the potential of getting a
whole lot worse, even deadly. But the very immediacy of his situation was liberating in a strange
way. Gone were those niggling concerns about his future, his obligations, a life like a straightjacket
and the bloody Noruma account. The last few days had put a lot of things into perspective. Ryou felt
like parts of him that'd been asleep for ages were coming awake to help him deal with real problems
he could actually tackle. He might be far from anything he knew or understood, but distances were
made to be traveled, and that involved putting one foot in front of another without worrying too
much about past decisions. The world around Ryou was real, for all it was bizarre, and this was what
he had to deal with right at the moment.

Darius dumped the armful he'd been carrying on the ground; Ryou's briefcase, strips of rubber, cut-
up material from the seats and other bits and pieces. Ryou noted that the toes of Darius' overlarge
sneakers had been hacked off and that the shoes had been redesigned with the help of bits of wire
and straps into a sort of enclosed sandal. Ryou nodded to himself; here was a man who definitely left

tortured self-doubt and regrets to the poets and philosophers, and who concentrated on the practical.

In the same spirit, he threw back the seat cover and got to his feet, reassured to note that he wasn't so
exhausted today. "What bad luck?"

Darius put his hands on his hips and gave the immediate countryside a truculent look. "I scouted
around and I can't find a single drop of water on this damned stretch of turf. We better run into some
on our way today, or tomorrow will feel like we're licking Nusku's rear-end. What are you staring
at?"

"How are we going to get off of here?" Ryou asked, pivoting around a second time. The rocky
outcropping that had sheltered them last night was the only break in the scenery; other than that, he
had a great view of moorland that abruptly ended in a precipitous edge all around. The wreck of the Honda was fifty meters away, as alien as a UFO in this setting. "We're on an island in the sky."

"Oh yeah, you don't know about the Broken Lands, do you."

"Did you expect me to get us off of here the same way we arrived?" Ryou asked with reluctance. His mind was clear and his body fairly rested, but a part of him he could not define felt drained nonetheless, and the idea of doing what he did yesterday all over again-

Ryou lost his view of the edge of the world when he was spun around by the shoulder. Darius was in his face, deadly serious and fingers tense on Ryou's coat. "No! Never do that again. Ever."

"Uh? Why?"

Darius scowled. "What you did yesterday was more dangerous than you can imagine, Inlander. I thought it'd be a fucking wonder if you could just push me into the first country near the no man's land, but you shot us halfway across the world. You have power like nobody I ever heard of, and you can't control it worth a bird's fart. You could have- hell, let's just say, you try that trick again and we'll wind up somewhere we really don't want to be."

"Where?"

"Inder, don't make me talk about it, not here in the Broken Lands." Darius glanced superstitiously around. "We're too close to that place as we are. But you remember the creatures we saw the first time we met?"

"I doubt I'll forget them in a hurry," Ryou muttered, pushing up his glasses.

"Where you're likely to send us with your lack of control, they're the sweetest thing you'll meet. The Per Gathas will get you back safely. Don't do anything foolish in the meantime. It seems the Lore and the arcana are more important than I thought, at least to get to where you want to go."

"A fact which I tried to call to your attention back in Tokyo," Ryou said pointedly. But then he remembered Darius had an urgent need to get home. "...I'm sorry. I guess I led you very far away from your country by dropping us here."

Darius snorted. "That's an understatement; we're at the back end of beyond alright. But that doesn't signify much in the Outlands; travel here is not a matter of distance. And on the bright side," he added with a savage grin that included Ryou without any reserve on Darius's side of Us vs. Them, "I'm damned sure my enemies won't know which side we're coming back from. If this little side trip doesn't confuse them, nothing will. This may just be one more way you saved my skin, though damned if I can figure out why you keep on doing that. Come on, let's pack up camp, we have a lot of walking ahead of us. Do you want this squirrel?"

"Which brings us back to my first point, how do we get off of this island, and no, thank you, you can have the squirrel."

"You sure?" Darius looked him dubiously. "Don't get finicky on me; you'll be thankful for squirrel and worse before we get somewhere with proper food."

"You're probably right," said Ryou, looking analytically at the bleak landscape. "But I'll wait until then, if you don't mind."

"Suit yourself," said Darius, picking up the meat after waving away the fly. "Though I have to say, this would taste a whole lot better dipped in honey and washed down with beer."
"Getting off of here?" Ryou prompted, ignoring the crunching sounds that followed.

Darius spat out a small bone, wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his sweatshirt and pointed at a spot over Ryou's shoulder. "Easy. We walk that way."

"And then?"

"We go on walking."

And so they did, for an entire day.

"So they're not really broken," said Ryou. He was sitting near another measly campfire, waiting for a diner of tubers to finish roasting; the only food Darius had been able to scrounge up this time. Which was better than Ryou could have done. He would have been unable to even start the fire, not knowing what a piece of flint looked like despite a degree in mathematics and an MBA.

"That's right, they're all actually one place. They're called the Broken Lands because- well, obviously." Darius jerked his head towards an island that appeared to be floating a hundred meters away, close enough where a bridge could have been built between the two if there hadn't been nothing but empty space in which to sink the pillars.

They'd walked all day, straight ahead, yet they'd never reached an edge. Every time they crested a small bluff or got out of a thicket of stunted trees, the cliff leading to the sky was always in the distance, sometimes a few hundred meters, occasionally so far Ryou could barely see it. He'd wanted to ask for an explanation all morning, but Darius was walking with a steady, tireless gait that ate the kilometers, and Ryou had quickly realized he didn't have the breath or the stamina to waste on questions. Darius might have assured him that landing here, so far from his home, wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but Ryou was still going to do his damnedest not to slow Darius down.

The weather on these Broken Lands was cool, though intermittently sunny, and at first Ryou had been glad of the winter coat he'd worn to the hospital what felt like a decade ago. By mid-morning, he was carrying it. By the afternoon, he was inwardly wishing it were lighter, though the thought pricked his conscience; Darius was carrying everything else strapped to his back with brake cables, a bundle made up of the car seat cover filled with various odds and ends as well as Ryou's briefcase. This evening they'd used the Noruma papers as tinder for the fire.

"So the ground we're walking on is perfectly normal," said Ryou, plunged into thought to avoid dwelling on the ache in his feet. He'd always preferred reasonable shoes over designer brand names, but they were still meant for office wear rather than hiking. "What we see...is an illusion?"

"Nope, it's real. If I had a well-made scorpio at hand, I could hit that one over there." Darius nodded at the nearest floating island, then he took a swig of water from a container that had once been the plastic insert meant to hold cups in the center of the Honda. They'd found a stream in the afternoon and made an early stop, fortunately, as Ryou's thirst had been even worse than his lingering fatigue and the soreness of his feet.

"...So somehow space is what's broken. It's as if this land is whole, but immersed into our dimension from a higher one where it's bent in an unusual shape. So we can walk along it, staying in its plane, but our perception of it at a distance is skewed by the bends in space. This is all a matter of dimensions, which is what you were trying to say with your onion layers. And it seems that
mathematics- an understanding of mathematics is the key to move us from...from one plane to another." Which didn't make sense; when did a puny human's knowledge of mathematics change the world in any way? When did simply knowing something change anything? Well...except at the quantum level...But that didn't translate to the macroverse.

Darius stared at him over the lip of the container. "I have no idea what you just said, so I hope you weren’t expecting something from me at this point."

"Haven’t you ever felt curious about this onion of yours?"

Darius snorted. "I have enough on my mind. It’s there, it’s the way the world works, I don’t bother about how or why. I leave that to the Per Gathas."

"Who are these Per Gathas you keep mentioning?"

"They're all big-headed magii like you." Darius gave one of the tubers, cooking in the ashes, a poke with a stick. "They're the descendants of Zaratusra and the keepers of his Lore. They're the only ones who can safely deal with the Veil, which puts them in a position of considerable power, let me tell you. It's thanks to them that we have any trade between countries at all, though they control what gets traded. The fact that you can't cross the border without a gate and their say-so is why the known world is not one massive empire already. It used to bug my ancestors no end, back when they had dreams of conquest, but now that we're dealing with the Imperium, I'm rather grateful. I hear there's a few magii around who don't belong to the Per Gathas, but without the Lore, they're making it up as they go along. They can't do much, and they often come to sticky ends. They'll either disappear without a trace, or their friends will find them torn in half, or burned to ashes, or eaten from the inside out, or-""

"I already agreed not to try any more plane jumping," said Ryou, pushing up his glasses and returning Darius' pointed look with an unruffled one.

"Keep that in mind. As for all that stuff you said earlier, I don't know about that. All I know is that, to get out of the Broken Lands, you head down. Away from the ones that float higher, and in the direction of those who seem to be floating lower. Charms and sigils are considered useful in avoiding a wrong turn, but obviously we'll have to make do without."

"How far away are we from somewhere more normal?" Assuming there was something normal out there anymore. Ryou's perception of 'normal' was as skewed as the countryside at present.

"No idea. Could be days, or a few weeks. Once we're out of here...well, it sort of depends where we end up, but we'll be a couple of weeks travel away from my home country if we can't score some horses somewhere." Darius frowned absently, a look of concern Ryou had caught sight of several times today when his traveling companion had glanced up at the sun and at the path ahead of them. Darius hadn't explained what he'd been doing in the no man's land when Ryou had found him other than 'I got into trouble with people who were trying to kill me and they dumped me there', but he'd made it clear he had a situation back home he had to urgently deal with.

"We'll take it easy for another day or two, but after that we'll have to walk faster," Darius finally concluded.

Easy...? It confirmed Ryou's fear. He wasn't used to that much physical exercise, but he'd had the feeling Darius was holding back due to Ryou's fatigue and his own injury, which seemed to be bothering him tonight from the way he sat hunched, wincing whenever he moved his right arm too wide.
"Here, eat these," said Darius, pushing one of the tubers at Ryou, who felt his stomach rumble right on cue. The tuber looked like a bifurcated yam, unpeeled, cooked in ashes and marred with them, but the smell of it made him salivate. Ryou reached for it, feeling somehow betrayed by his own body. The root was hot and burned his fingers, but he juggled it around and bit into it anyway.

"We'll need to find more food soon," said Darius, looking around them slowly as if searching for something. "Jenexti won't keep us going for more than a couple of days."

He'd waved the tuber around in illustration as he spoke. Ryou looked down at his own meal. So this was a jenexti. It was full of hard bits that hadn't cooked properly and the taste was a little sour. Jenexti. Ryou didn't think he could pronounce it the way Darius did…This reminded him of another question.

"I never asked you, how come I can understand your language?"

Darius had polished off his roots and was giving the one Ryou was holding a thoughtful look, as if wondering whether it might go the same way as the squirrel. "Hmm? Hell if I know. Tongues are no problem for those following in the steps of the blessed Zaratusra. The father of the Lore left this gift to all magian, the ability to break the Curse of Babel for those who walk his path, so my tutor told me. You can now understand and speak every language beneath the Veil. Congratulations. Just make sure you don't accidentally say anything anyone might want to kill you for."

Babel. The Curse of Babel. A faint memory stirred; a lecture he'd attended at university, about the use of mathematics in other realms than physics and the theoretical existence of a universal metalanguage (the lecture itself had been sparsely attended because it was in English, which had to be ironic in some way or other). The lecturer had, in a fit of lyricism Ryou had not approved of, called this theoretical language protoglossia, 'the language before Babel'; then he'd had to explain to his mainly Shinto and Buddhist audience what that meant. The man had been an American, which in Ryou’s opinion explained the need to gild his theory with catch phrases as if he were trying to sell it...

"Anyway, it's all just magic," said Darius dismissively. "Are you going to eat that? You should if you want to have the strength to walk anywhere tomorrow."

In Ryou's way of thinking, magic was what primitive thinkers called phenomenon they could not understand. Now that Ryou was sitting on an island that wasn't one, with another one floating - but not really - a hundred yards away, talking in a universal tongue and possessing the ability to propel himself through dimensions...now he felt a distinct sympathy for those 'primitive thinkers'. He bit into the jenexti, shelving all other questions until he could talk to someone who knew more about it. Those Per Gathas, for example.

"Have some water, too," said Darius, handing Ryou the cupholder container. "Then we sleep."

"Sleep?" Ryou paused as he reached out for the drink. The sun was still at the edge of the sky. Ryou's watch was as hopelessly turned around as its owner, but he'd taken a stab at guessing the time during a break in their walk this morning, and according to his best estimate it was now six in evening.

"We walk with daylight, so we'll get up early."

Ryou never went to bed before midnight, he slept very little. That was usually on a good bed, too, not on a rock-strewn stretch of earth. And he had so many questions, some insanely theoretical, others of an extremely practical nature. But he finished his meal, drank the water, and lay down on the hard, prickly ground besides Darius, the car seat cover drawn over them both. The questions
were there, but they were too crazy, too big; they'd crush him right now. And he was...unexpectedly tired...

Ryou never saw the sun go down that night, he was fast asleep in minutes and slept - according to his watch, still attempting to cling to normality - eleven straight hours before Darius shook him awake a bit before dawn.

Then they trekked on. The day was similar to the previous one, except that it grew colder and rained, and Ryou was conducting a solitary fight against an increasingly empty yet upset stomach...
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

A crunch of tall wheatgrass, pussy willows and ferns heralded Darius's return from a quick reconnaissance up ahead.

"We're stopping here tonight," he said when he was in earshot.

Ryou had sunk down onto a rain-wet rock near the large stream they'd discovered ten minutes ago. He moved the worn-down stumps of what had once been his legs and said, "I can still go on." Hopefully that was true. It had to be true, Ryou grimly reminded himself; this was only the second day they were walking, who knew how far they yet had to go.

"No, here's good enough. We need some rest." Darius peeled up his sweatshirt and looked at the bandages, wrinkled and sagging around his middle, with some concern. "We won't be able to follow this waterway up ahead, there's too much underbrush. Let's take advantage of the water here."

"Advantage?" Ryou asked blankly, most of his mind on Darius' injuries and what they would do if they got infected. He noted the sweatshirt and shoes dropping to ground near Darius's pack at the edge of the stream, but the significance of it did not penetrate until Darius was removing the jogging pants.

"What are you doing?" Ryou asked, and was faintly impressed with himself for the uncaring tone of the question.

"Bathing. You too, Inlander. I still stink of the unguents they used back in that sick-house; that and the sweat will attract blackfly and worse. We don't need that while injured." The words were followed by a splish splash louder than the background gurgle and rustle of the brook.

"Don't get your bandages wet," Ryou said, examining his shoes (there was a sprung seam at the sole that would soon break).

"I'm taking them off. I'm better now, the sigils of blessed Hygiea are doing their job. And dirty as these wrappings are, they'll be worse than nothing."

Ryou was going to object, but his eyes had jumped to where Darius was unwinding the strips of gauze and tape, and had stuck there.

The water had dug a crooked path between outcroppings of clay and rock in the moorlands. Edged in mossy slate, it was only knee-deep. Darius, back turned towards Ryou, had gone down on one knee to splash water over himself. He leaned down to wash his face and scrub and rinse his hair in the current, then he rummaged the bottom of the riverbed, raising a cloud of sand and mud. He stood up with a small flat stone in his hand, and proceeded to scrape lightly at his skin. He was either tanned uniformly or else that pale bronze color was his original shade.

As he moved, lifted his arm, reached behind his back, wiry muscles without the faintest hint of fat coiled over a body built like a battering ram. Darius didn't look like those sculpted men Ryou affected not to notice in the magazines racked over the vendor's head. This body was entirely functional and nobody who looked at him would doubt he could drive a sword through compacted trash or overpower a policeman. Ryou could see the edge of his injuries, red and a little puffy; on their way to becoming one of several other scars decorating that bronze skin.
Darius knelt once more to sluice water over his shoulders and down his front. Ryou was distantly aware that his mouth was dry and that he couldn't swallow right now to save his life. Darius's body might not be that of a magazine model, but its solid practicality and the undercurrent of power and lethality was an extension of its owner's self. It was like seeing him revealed in more ways than even nakedness could achieve.

Darius stood back up and chased the excess water down his arms and back with his palms. Ryou's eyes traveled up once again, from the firm, hard lines of the legs up to the arch of the muscled back, the shoulders turned a bit in the light of the late afternoon sun dancing off water-

Darius was looking over his shoulder straight at Ryou with an enigmatic expression on his face.

It would have made it look even worse to jerk his gaze away at this point, worse by far to say anything that sounded like an excuse, so Ryou stared straight back, face a mask. Show them nothing.

Darius looked like he was waiting for something. Then he ran a hand down his hair, wringing it out. "In Ras Dal Aran, they'd stone you for looking at me like that," he stated.

Ryou said nothing, showed nothing.

Darius stared at him some more, then he smiled. It was crooked and far from reassuring. "Which is better than Caroligian, where they whip sodomites to death after castration." The dark eyes turned inwards for a moment. "Or is that somewhere else..."

Darius turned and waded towards Ryou. Ryou was well aware that physically he was outclassed, even factoring in Darius's injuries. Better stay calm.

"In the Imperium, however, they'll screw anyone or anything, and eyeing a man in the public baths is pretty much the norm," said Darius, stepping onto the slate of the river's edge two meters away from Ryou. "In Jiroh they'll jail you for twelve days if they find you out, though they don't look too hard. While in most free states, it's a sign of virility for any self-respecting citizen to have had a young man as a lover by the time he's middle aged."

He was standing there, gloriously naked, looking over at Ryou. Ryou, for his part, kept up that eye contact with no more emotion than if they were talking about the weather.

"And of course there's far-off Tula, where I hear they'll cut you and feed your dick and entrails to the dogs while you're still alive."

Ryou nodded as if he already knew that. Darius's lips grew ever so faintly pinched.

"Got anything to say for yourself, Inlander?" he finally asked, eyebrows arched.

"Nothing, other than it just occurred to me that I never asked you where you came from," Ryou countered in the same vein, certain now he was being baited.

Silence. Darius scratched his chin, mouth twisting beneath the cover of his hand, and then he gave up and laughed. "I swear, Ryou, I've known marble statues that were easier to read. I've never seen anyone like you before. You're like those Broken Lands. I could punch you just by reaching over, but you're a mile away anyways. Ease your mind; I'm from Assyria," he added, drying off briskly with his sweatshirt. "In my country, it's- that is, it used to be common. Back in the old days, it was a thing of admiration to vow oneself to a brother, a fellow swordbearer, to hold him higher than your women, your family, or anyone except your country. Our great warriors were often paired like that. They died side by side on the battlefield and were honored together in the tales. The Ionian and
Persian states we joined to our nation certainly didn't change that. But now, with the backlash of years of Imperial occupation, it's seen as being a little too Roman, if you know what I mean."

The word 'Roman' tumbled all the way down the list of Ryou's facts without managing to connect to any of them.

"...but hell, with all the Free City fighters and Boeotians and such in our army, at the end, it doesn't matter. As long as a man doesn't flaunt it and acts like a man..." Darius laughed again, this time an ugly snicker that made Ryou's small hairs stand up. But Darius wasn't looking at him. "Never mind. I was thinking of somebody else."

"...Did you say Roman?"

Darius was examining his wound, two long gashes of puckered red flesh with black sutures. "Yeah. As long as you don't start acting like a eunuch or some goddamned woman, we'll be fine. What's it like in your country?"

"What? Oh, you mean...that. It's not punishable, but we stay, ah, we stay discreet." An ugly memory made Ryou look down at his shoes. He was peripherally aware of Darius moving to a nearby clump of tall bushes, and felt obligated to add, "I apologize if I offended you earlier, but don’t trouble yourself further about my orientation. It doesn't concern you."

Darius paused in the act of twisting a long branch from the thicket. "Doesn't concern me?" He gave Ryou a narrow-eyed look. "You're not a boy-lover, are you?"

"A boy- no! No. You're not really my type, that's all I meant. But otherwise I prefer partners my own age," Ryou said, then the back of his brain registered some amazement at having said that at all to someone he barely knew. Though he supposed it was true. He'd never really thought about it; it'd been years since he'd had a choice in partners, while in Shore he chose those who looked the most discreet and who made him feel a little less like a customer. But the few men he'd been attracted to, the even fewer he'd actually had a relationship with, were men much like himself: intellectual rather than athletic, quiet, reserved. Ryou didn't think he was attracted to dangerous sword-wielding foreigners, and he was pretty certain it would be hazardous to his health if he was.

"That's okay then." Darius' lips curled into a smirk. "But you were sure getting an eyeful of someone who wasn't your type."

"I was concerned about your injury," Ryou said, mostly truthfully.

"Really? I didn't think my thighs were injured," said Darius, stripping off the bark from the branch with a long, slow yank, eyes riveted on Ryou's.

Ryou returned that stare without the slightest hint of feeling, which even he thought was pretty impressive.

Darius finally shook his head and gave Ryou a grin full of teeth. "You're no fun to tease, magian. But you wait, I'll find a way of getting a rise out of you yet. Come on, hop into the water, you're filthy. I'm going to catch us dinner, if the fish around here are dumb enough to bite." Darius hefted the branch in one hand and some bared copper electrical wire in the other.

Ryou had to concede that he could do with a clean-up. He bullied his stiffening body into motion and went to sit by the river. The air felt even colder than it had any rights to be once he took off his coat and jacket. His shirt had once been white; it was now a splotchy cream decorated with sweat, grass stains, ash and dirt. Ryou thought of Sasaki, who always kept some of Ryou's spare clothes
around to come to his boss's aid in case of coffee spills. Ryou wondered what his assistant would think of this shirt, and it almost made him smile.

Ryou managed to get his shoes, socks and pants off without letting his feet touch ground. Then he took off his underwear, telling himself this was no different than a trip to a hot spring. Not that he'd been to a hot spring for quite a while, and never with a man who knew his inclinations before...

Another difference was the temperature of the water. It was ten degrees, if that, and it felt like an electric shock when he dipped his worn feet into it. Ryou kept them away from the muddy, rocky bottom of the water, and just hoped he was not the one who'd get an infection. Not something he could worry about now...He leaned forward to cup some water into his hands, watching the skin go pale from the cold, and then splashed it over his chest and started to rub. It wasn't quite as bad as he feared it'd feel, though now the faint late afternoon breeze came wielding knives.

...Ryou turned his head, instincts prickling, to find Darius looking him over. The other man, still naked, had seated himself on a rocky ledge three meters upstream. He'd tied a thick thorn to the end of the wire, and was now reinforcing the other end tied around the branch with strips of car seat. But his eyes were on Ryou.

"Will you be able to catch any fish with both of us splashing around here?" Ryou asked, forbidding himself the slightest hint of discomfort. It wasn't as if he could object after his earlier exhibit.

"Hell no, not for another hour. When evening falls, if I'm lucky." There was an odd little smile on the corner of Darius's mouth.

"Then what are you doing there?"

"Resting. Preparing. Otherwise, just enjoying." The direction of his gaze and his tone left no doubt in mind what it was he was enjoying.

Ryou sighed. "You don't have to get a rise out of me, you know."

"Is that what I'm doing?" asked Darius almost dreamily.

Ryou looked around again. Really looked this time, without any preconceptions about this being a joke.

...In Ryou's view of the world, men had always been either predominantly straight (though occasionally willing to make exceptions) or flamboyantly gay, with a few non-descript camouflaged specimens like himself halfway between. But he'd become aware these past few years of visiting Shore that there were, in fact, other types; he was just appallingly bad at recognizing them, and it appeared this had come back to bite him once again.

It was like a trickle of the cold water dripped down Ryou's back. He looked away instinctively, but that made him feel too awkward and vulnerable, and he had to look back.

"Ah, I thought you said-..." The look was so unequivocal that he didn't need to work his way up to the subject, but beyond that words ran out on him.

"Hmm?" That gaze went back up to Ryou's face, taking the scenic route. "I told you I'm from Assyria. It's no crime there."

"You said it was too Roman," Ryou countered, mouth dry.

"Huh-uh. But then again, I'm half Roman," said Darius, the smile getting feral.
"You might have mentioned that before," Ryou said, a weak comeback he wouldn't have bothered with if he hadn't been trying to hide his uncertainty at where this seemed to be going.

It seemed to hit home harder than he could ever have thought, though; the corner smile slipped, and darkness touched Darius's eyes, there and gone again. "Yeah, there's a lot more about me I should be mentioning, and Inder knows I've never dissembled in my life, but...I rather like the way you've looked at me until now. It doesn't seem to matter much out here, right? Who we were back in our homelands?" Darius's gaze wandered around the sweeps of empty plains broken into their crazy jigsaw pattern in the sky. Then he looked once more at Ryou and his sudden smile was downright evil.

He dropped the fishing rod and let himself slip into the water. Ryou froze like a deer in headlights as Darius waded towards him, not sure what to do - no, more deeply that that, not sure what he wanted. *What does it matter what we do, nobody will ever know- but this is not one of those grubby moments at Shore, he's a- a friend- and to start with, I prefer to be the one to initiate-*

"Still unreadable, huh?" said Darius as he reached Ryou. He leaned forward, a hand curving beneath one of Ryou's knees. "I've been intending to do this all day. Sorry, Ryou, but this is going to hurt."

Ryou's mouth was open, around a question or an objection or consent, he still couldn't say-

Darius picked up Ryou's left leg, hoisted up the foot and started massaging and scrubbing the sole in the water.

A whimper escaped him, but then Ryou bit his lip and endured.

"I wonder what was going through your mind right then," said Darius with a faint smile that suggested he damn well knew. "You don't need to be troubled either," he added, examining a ruptured and encrusted blister. "You're easy to look at, and these past seven years I've chosen to lie down with men rather than women when I've had the choice, but it'd be poor repayment for what you've done for me. I said I can't promise to get you home, but I can keep you from getting further entangled in my life. Not that you're all that grateful right this second, I bet."

"I guess I did have to clean them out," Ryou answered, his voice weak, belying his words.

"Yeah. Okay, this one's not too bad," Darius added, checking the right foot. "I saw you favoring the other."

Darius reached past him, close enough where Ryou could have leaned forward and leaned his head against that hard chest. Ryou stared blankly at the water over Darius's shoulder. It seemed nothing was going to happen, and he still hadn't figured out how he would have felt about it if it had.

Then he realized Darius had lifted his foot again and was measuring it against the sneaker he'd picked up.

"What are you doing?"

"You have really small, narrow feet, you know that? Like a woman. It's funny, since other than that, you're man enough." This was said in reference to the rest of Ryou's body and with a specific glance at a part of his anatomy that Ryou was not used to having people comment on after only a short acquaintance. But the words and the look were so casual that Darius could have been talking about Ryou's choice of business suits. It seemed people from Assyria had different standards of what was acceptable in a conversation.

"Thank you," said Ryou, with just the right degree of faint sarcasm to make the corner of Darius's
mouth twitch upwards in a gesture that was somehow, after only two days, starting to feel familiar. "And this is in aid of?"

"You're wearing these shoes tomorrow. I can cut them further and tighten the straps to make them fit."

"But what will you wear?" Ryou asked, caught short.

"I'll go barefoot," was the answer, equally surprised.

"You can't possibly do that, your feet will be just as bad as mine."

Darius looked mystified. "I hardly wore shoes at all until I was fifteen, and I can still race ten miles over sand and wrestle as naked as a boy when I want to. And this is grassland, not rock. You truly have been wearing shoes all this time? I mean, since you were a child? Even though your roads are so smooth and flat?"

"Well, yes."

"Huh," said Darius, as if contemplating some great oddity. Then he shook himself and gave Ryou that smile full of edges that was also beginning to feel familiar. "If you were one of my soldiers, some rookie who'd never marched behind anything other than his mother's goats, I'd have you stand sentry all night to toughen you up. Then I'd have you walk all day again. As it is, I don't think that'll work too well with you. So you're going to let your feet rest without bindings tonight and use my shoes tomorrow, because otherwise I will have to leave you behind to die from a case of footrot, and that will make me feel like an ungrateful cur. I don't like feeling like an ungrateful cur. It puts me in a bad mood. So you'll wear these and not argue."

Ryou decided not to argue.

Darius washed their clothes and let them dry on the branches of the thicket. He threw the car seat over a shivering Ryou when the breeze had dried the latter off to merely damp, but Darius himself walked around naked as if he did this often, and by the sound of it, he did.

They didn't catch any fish, so they went to bed hungry, lying together beneath the car seat cover, naked and with no embarrassment on Darius's part (Ryou's feelings were still too complicated, and he was glad of the way sleep took him to oblivion within minutes once more). It turned out Darius had set snares while looking for firewood earlier, and he did manage to catch a young, skinny rabbit during the night. He hung it from his pack the next morning; it swung there like a pitiful scrap of fur while Darius walked. Ryou followed as if hypnotized.

The rabbit looked even skinnier that night, roasting over the fire. Ryou's legs were still sore, and his feet had found new places to blister, but overall they were not getting worse. Darius mentioned they'd gone further that day, and looked pleased.

Chapter End Notes

A while back, before this fic started, I was browsing through that utter timesuck that is Wikipedia - with the evil but all-so-clickable links - and wandered into a heated discussion of the roles of Achilles and Patroclus/Patroklos, which was interesting, and how Alexander the Great and Hephaestion honored the two great warriors by putting
wreaths on their tombs and *running a footeace naked*, which I found riveting. The most powerful king of his time and his greatest general and best friend, racing in the buff to honor dead heroes and the Gods. That, and the original *300* and other elements bubbled at the back of my brain and crashed headlong into Out's inception and my desire to write about a society with different mores and customs than bloody Middle Ages Europe where most fantasy seems to happen.

Enjoy the madness. A disclaimer aimed at serious history buffs: as Darius kinda suggests, his culture has been changed and warped by the addition and juxtaposition of a lot of others, some antique, some, as we'll see, not quite so antique...Plus this is just a lot of fun ^__^
Chapter 8

In the middle of the fourth day after Ryou's arrival, the countryside around them changed abruptly. They were still traveling through highlands dotted with occasional clumps of trees, but now it stretched out to the horizon the way a decent landscape should.

"Praise Seraosa for leading us out of that bloody puzzlebox," Darius said, looking with grim satisfaction at the uninterrupted scenery spreading around their hillock.

"Do you know where we are?" asked Ryou, sinking down into the grass nearby. It smelled wonderful when crushed beneath their feet, like sunshine, water and green, growing things; a smell Ryou was getting heartily sick of by now.

"Not a clue. We'll figure it out sooner or later, let's just head east for now and see if we can hit a settlement, or even better, a road or a border. The sooner we get back to Assyria, the better."

Ryou stared at the great wide and totally empty sweep of hills around them, with only the occasional rocky outcropping or tree to break up the uninterrupted greenery. "A settlement? Out here?"

"Yes. There's summering camps for herders, and way stations and inns on the roads. Some brave fools come all the way out to the Broken Lands to hunt, trap animals for fur, and collect bark and herbs for nostrums."

"How do we find them?" Ryou asked, fearing the answer was 'walk around, looking'. His feet were still blistered and raw, while the sneakers were showing signs of wear. And it'd only been four days. He'd not complained once. Neither had Darius made any comment when Ryou had peeled off his footwear and socks and washed the bloody mess in another stream last night. The fact of the matter was, they had to get out of here, and to do that they had to walk. Whining about it was not going to get them anywhere. It might be presumptuous of him, but Ryou did not think Darius would abandon him, even though it was obvious in a hundred little ways that his companion was in a great hurry to get home. But that very fact created a deep obligation for Ryou to in no way hold him up. Ryou was responsible for this situation after all. And on a less important level, Darius already knew Ryou was a weak, unexercised gay business man whose lack of control in his maths had inconceivably stranded them here; Ryou was not going to add the adjectives 'whiny' and 'pathetic' to that list if he could help it.

"If we can spot a stone marker, we'll know roughly where we are. There should be one every three miles around the Broken Lands. It's considered a border of sorts." Darius glanced around, then down at Ryou. "Come on, let's try to move onwards before it gets too late in the day."

"A stone marker?"

"Yes. It will give us directions to the nearest road."

"Is it rectangular and about this high with signs carved on it?"

Darius stared at the height Ryou was indicating, then the direction in which Ryou pointed. "Where?"

"That hill over there. The one with the three trees on it." It was about two hundred meters away.

"...You can see it that clearly?"

"You can't?" Ryou stared in surprise at his companion. Then he did a mental double-take. From the
first time they’d met Ryou had been impressed with Darius's tough expression, those brown eyes always narrowed in a way that felt a little threatening even when he smiled; indeed, especially when he smiled. But now a different interpretation presented itself. "Darius...do you need glasses?"

Darius moved his hands away from where they were shading and focusing his vision. "Glasses? Spectacles like yours? Of course not. I'm neither an old man nor a magian who spends all his days with his nose in a book."

"Is that so?"

"You may have just seen a tree stump," said Darius, already striding off towards the hill.

Ryou got to his feet in painful stages and followed. "If ever you come back to my world, I'll recommend you to my ophta- my eye doctor. He makes glasses, and he'll love you; you two share the notion of what someone is supposed to do to not stress one's eyes."

"I told you I do not need spectacles," groused Darius over his shoulder.

"Does it still look like a tree stump to you now?" Ryou asked, raising his voice since Darius had accelerated. "Because at this distance, that would be cause for concern."

The word he got in return was not Japanese, or rather it was sufficiently untranslatable where the mysterious power that broke the Curse of Babel wasn't willing to take a stab at it.

"What does it say?" Ryou asked as he eventually crested the hill, trying not to limp. The stone marker had symbols carved into it; Ryou recognized the sun and not much else, but it looked more like a pictogram than language.

Darius was standing a few yards away, shielding his eyes from the sun and squinting (Ryou smiled inwardly). "There should be some place to stay not too far from here. A camp two miles to the south, near a river. Then a path will lead us to the road, ten miles after that."

Ryou's feet throbbed, but paying it more attention than it merited would not get him anywhere. "Let's go, then." Two miles. That'd be another half hour. He could easily walk another half hour. No- no wait, miles, not kilometers. "Um, did you say mile? Like the English mile?"

"English?" Darius gave him a puzzled look, already a few steps down the slope. "It's the Roman mile, a thousand paces."

"Oh." How long was it going to take them to walk two thousand paces? Ryou realized grimly he was about to find out.

Ryou's Seiko clocked it at forty nine minutes, and it was to be noted that 'paces' were not actual steps because Ryou counted his mechanically and reached four thousand, one hundred and eighty before Darius, ten meters up ahead, made an abrupt gesture to stop and stay where he was.

They'd been catching glimpses of the river for the past ten minutes, slate grey beneath the cloudy sky. They'd also been following faint tracks in the long grass and heather, which made their progress easier. Ryou walked towards Darius, trying to hide his limp, and saw the path wind around a hillock to reveal a long, low wooden house.

Or rather, what was left of it.

"It's burnt," said Ryou, fatigue making him redundant.
Darius didn't say anything. His eyes had narrowed to slits, and not because he was trying to make something out in the distance.

"It's deserted," he finally said. "No smell of horses or smoke. It happened awhile back, I'd say."

Ryou glanced around the very small settlement. There was an outbuilding next to the house; a one-walled stable that had a jut of roof over it. It wasn't going to be as good a shelter as the building would have been, but since the latter had been gutted by flame, the stables were better than nothing. By the looks of the sky, it was going to rain again.

"Just a moment." Darius put a hand on Ryou's shoulder, eyes on the settlement, his primitive spear tight in his hand. "Anybody there?" he shouted.

No answer.

"We're stranded travelers. We mean you no harm!"

"I thought you said it was empty," interjected Ryou.

"I've been known to be wrong," answered Darius, eyes still on the remains of the low house. "People around here are not fighters, but they can nail us both to the ground with bear arrows before we could do anything about it."

"...There are bears around here?"

"Anyone there?" shouted Darius again. "We ask for one night of shelter in the name of the Path Maker. We'll leave tomorrow morning."

Still nothing. Darius didn't look satisfied, but resumed his walk towards the house at a brisk pace. Ryou followed him but, with his legs in their state, the distance between them grew.

The house had been partially dug into the ground, a short wall of slate and stone giving it a bit of extra height and holding up the now-gone flat roof of logs. Even the damage from the fire couldn't hide the fact that it'd been a crude shelter at best. Darius went down the incline to the entrance, still framed by two stout wooden posts. Ryou saw him glance around the gutted interior, then he leapt back up to the ground level and walked around the house. Even from some distance away, Ryou could tell his traveling companion was scowling.

Ryou, who just wanted to sit down, made his way to the stables. Something clinked beneath his feet as he neared the shelter. He bent down to examine a red and black pot that had been smashed into the dirt, broken when its owners evacuated their belongings from the fire presumably. There was more debris strewn around, now that he was looking; moldy and frayed old ropes hanging in the stable, bones from small animals, possibly sheep, dumped near the wall along with other nameless rubbish that was past smelling ripe. A smashed-in wooden barrel, pewter shards, rags stiffened by exposure to dirt, rot and rain, more pottery, gnawed bones, ripped-up woven baskets, nameless pieces of wood that could have once been anything. A large fire had been lit not too far away from where he stood. Ryou rubbed his shoulders. Even with his winter coat, it was chilly.

Ryou stared straight ahead at nothing, and then he slowly turned back towards the refuse heap as a few details of the previous picture leapt out and slotted together.

...Ryou had never hoped for much in his life, but he found himself hoping he was wrong as he walked forward.

There was a space around the rubbish that his feet would not cross into, an almost visible perimeter
that instinctively felt dangerous, contaminating. Ryou paused, then circled around, keeping the same distance until he could see what he'd thought were a few pots from another angle.

Then he turned and stared at the stables, gripping his arms through his coat, fighting the feeling that if he hadn't looked, then it wouldn't have been. An irrational feeling. It was what it was.

The sound of approaching footsteps made him jump and spin around. But it was only Darius.

"Ryou? What-" Darius glanced down and frowned. "Shit. I had a feeling."

A crunch of footsteps as Darius strode up to the nearest skull, unfortunately not yet bare of skin and flesh. The rest of the bones had been pulled apart by wild animals, or at least that's what Ryou hoped.

"What happened?" asked Ryou, and then, since there really was only one way these four people could have died all together out here, away from the burning house, "Who did this to them?"

"Who knows. Bandits, or worse." Darius leaned down to pick up a broken arrow shaft, just the tail end left, but Darius barely glanced at it and was scrutinizing their surroundings instead. "About two months ago. Damn, this used to be a fairly safe place. People too poor to bother with, and the Praetorian patrols kept the roads safe. The Imperium is cracking. This is the downside of the wars...Fuck." The arrow snapped in Darius' hands and he threw it away. "Come on, let's move out of here."

He was five steps away before Ryou reacted. "But- but what about-...?" He gestured at the heap behind him when Darius turned around.

"What were you thinking of doing, burying them?" Darius asked curtly. "If there's predators in this region, then places like this are nothing more than targets we need to get away from. We're sitting ducks here. I don't fancy getting tortured to death as campfire entertainment and I bet neither do you, so move it."

The last words whipped Ryou into motion. He'd not been thinking of burying the remains. He'd never even seen a corpse before today, the closest he'd ever been to death were the pictures of the deceased at a funeral, the idea of picking up a shovel and hacking away at the sod to bury victims of a massacre - that was beyond what he'd imagined. He'd just thought they should try and warn somebody, the authorities for starters.

Darius was already halfway to the river. Ryou didn't look back as he ran to catch up. His feet hurt, but that really didn't matter.

They didn't speak much that afternoon, and not at all for the last two hours of their trek when rain like teardrops started to fall from the grey, worn sky. Darius followed the river, along the shore thick with rushes and brush. Ryou did not think they were making for the road anymore. He wasn't sure where they were going, and didn't want to ask.

An hour after the rain finally let up, the two of them stopped and made camp for the night. They could have walked on farther, the wet, anemic sun that'd poked through the clouds was a good way from the horizon yet, but Darius said he liked the look of this place. It was a large crescent of clay carved out of a bluff by the river ages ago. The retreat of the water had left it dry and protected from the late afternoon wind. Darius built a small fire with the wood he'd carried from last night's camp, then he piled so many stones around it that it almost guttered. He didn't say much, and he would
glance around each time a bird sang or an animal scurried away.

Darius had been knotting together several rotten leather thongs taken from the stables while he walked earlier. He now had a long sling in his hand. "I'm going to try and find us something to eat, or we won't get far tomorrow. Stay around here and go look for more wood. Get branches and such out from the underbrush where it will be dry. Don't toss on anything wet and send up a smoke column."

"Okay," said Ryou to his receding back. Ryou stood up and staggered towards the nearest thicket. Hunger, exposure and exhaustion were taking their cumulative toll, but even if his body felt nearer to the brink of collapse with every step, it was good to have something to do.

Ryou eventually dropped a small bundle of twigs and branches near the fire. The stones were starting to warm up, heating the air around them a little. Ryou put his fingers on them until he felt warmth again. Around him night was falling, and Darius was still not back.

Ryou had had time to think, to dissect his feelings. It was normal in the circumstances to feel shock, but it'd been further poisoned by a deeper, more personal sense of unease. He'd pinned it down. It was, of all things, guilt.

Ryou had, for the first time since he was a child, acted on a wild and selfish impulse. He'd abandoned his family and his duty to throw himself to the winds on an insane undertaking that wasn't even any of his business. These past four days, even though he was hungry and sore, he was challenged, awake, alive in a way he hadn't felt in...ever, really. He was doing something that a straight-jacketed, insignificant person like himself could never have imagined doing this time last week. It wasn't that he was having fun, of course, Ryou noted as he took off his improvised sandals and saw the mess in the last rays of sunset. But he was...he was out, he was living something extraordinary. Those Broken Lands had challenged his intellect as it hadn't been since university. Walking through them at Darius's side had been like nothing before in his life.

He'd been naïve. Downright idiotic. Despite the Rajin and the attack by the border crossers, he'd not realized at a visceral level just how dangerous his position was here, in this strange, savage land. Life had certainly turned around and showed him in ugly detail just what kind of place this was. As a result, a deep part of Ryou that did not abide by logic, the last bastion of superstition within him, was telling him that those deaths were somehow his fault, as if Life had had to arrange them just to educate him.

It was a stupid notion, and once Ryou pinned it down, he dealt with it summarily. But another thought came with it that he could not eliminate. The dangers of a strange, savage land...huh? But he had seen scenes like this before. Mass graves being dug up on the ten o'clock news, women shrieking and crying while Ryou had drunk his tea and thought fugitive comments about the state of the world, before turning on his laptop. He was damned certain there were places in his civilized world where people stumbled upon the site of massacres and carried on walking with just a note to be careful the same fate did not befall them; places where even the news cameras and the eyes of the world did not go. Ryou had known this in a removed way every time he'd picked up a newspaper and didn't immediately skip to the financial section. What was the difference between those truths back in his world and what he'd seen today, except that he, Ujiie Ryou, had been forced to confront it in person? That this is what it took to make it real, to shock him, maybe that was what he should be feeling guilty about.

Ryou shook his head sharply and looked around the gathering evening for Darius. He'd known this endeavor was dangerous when the border crossers had shot at them, busting the Honda's back window. Or before, when he'd seen the Bher Rajin, as Darius called them. Ryou had taken this path
anyway. This made him a fool and a triple fool, but he'd done it, he'd followed nothing more than a wild impulse and a smile with no regrets or remorse, and now he was here and recriminations would wait until he was...

Back home? It felt unreal.

Ryou faced the fact that there was a chance he was not going to make it back home. His skull might be turning white at some point in the near future. The fact that his family would not know what had become of him bothered him more than the thought of death itself.

Glancing around, still in thought, Ryou started with surprise. Darius was back. He was standing at the top of the bluff, barely visible in his grey jogging attire in the deepening twilight. He was standing straight as a spear, staring out into the night, with no food at hand. It was the stance that caught Ryou's attention. Something wary, guarded. Ryou frowned.

A minute later, he'd joined his companion. "Darius?" Ryou spoke instinctively in a low voice. Darius didn't turn towards him, didn't blink. With such focus in his eyes, face grim and intent, he looked like a hunting hawk made human.

"There's someone out there," said Darius before Ryou could ask him a question. "And not travelers."

The way he said that told Ryou all he needed to know. He turned to scrutinize the gathering darkness. "How can you tell?"

"I heard horses bickering. A stallion and a gelding, I'd wager. Praetorian patrols ride well-disciplined mares, trappers and herders use mules; anybody else sticks to the road and its protection. I could be wrong." Darius added grimly, "but I know I'm not."

"Do you think it's the same ones who-..."

"No, those shits will be long gone. But it's more of the same, I'm ready to bet."

"Oh. Shall I go douse our fire?"

"Use dirt," said Darius, still staring out into the evening. "Then come back up here. Leave our things. One way or another, we won't need them anymore."

"What? Why?"

"Follow me when you're done," was all Darius said, striding off down the side of the bluff.

Ryou's only option was to hurry and comply.
The river wound and curved its way through the grasslands, marked by occasional clumps of trees like beads on a string. The strangers had elected to camp by its bank about a kilometer away from where Ryou and Darius had stopped. Darius led Ryou through the darkness with such caution that it took them over an hour to creep nearer. For the last twenty minutes, Ryou could also hear horses snort, stamp and whicker, and sporadic shouts and laughs. Ryou had grown used to how dark the nights were in this land, and his eyes could lead him without too much stumbling and falling by the light of the quarter moon and stars. By contrast the pinpoint yellow light of a fire looked as alien in the distance as neon.

At one point Darius gestured at Ryou to stop and hunker down in the shadow of a dense thicket, then he crept away. He took nearly an hour to get back, stretching Ryou's nerves at every shout and outburst of laughter from the other camp.

Then Darius appeared at his side like a phantom and sat down, making Ryou jump.

"Well?" whispered Ryou. "Are they bandits?"

Darius was staring blindly ahead in the direction of the campfire and appeared to be chewing something over. "No, worse. Deserters. Five of them. The three doing all the talking are not Imperials or Assyrian. From their Latin and the way they're drinking, my best guess is Jiroh."

"Oh. What are we going to do?"

Darius scratched his chin. Then he looked at Ryou. "We need horses, weapons and food, or we are not going to make it very far. Besides, I don't like knowing these guys are roaming around the same countryside we are. If they ride us down in daylight, we're dead meat. It's better to take the fight to them now. They can't harm us once they're dead."

Ryou had had the feeling this was where all this was going, but Darius's curt outline of a plan to murder five people in cold blood before they could do the same to them still sent shockwaves through Ryou's mind. To think he'd once considered Darius's handling of the policeman back in Tokyo to be excessive...Ryou really was far from home, far from law and order. But this was a fact, and one he had to deal with. So, "There's five of them," was all he said.

Darius was watching the distant fire again. "Yeah. Five bandits I could take; that kind of scumbag can't fight anything harder than helpless peasants. Five trained soldiers is a different matter. There's two standing watch, and the guy stationed at the horses knows what he's doing, at any rate. I can't get near him."

And then Darius smiled, the same smile that had haunted Ryou and dragged him to the Outlands in its wake. "It's going to be a gamble, but hell, it's a better way to go than slowly starving to death or rotting in an Imperial cell. Listen up, Ryou. Stay here and keep an ear peeled. If I beat them, I'll be back to fetch you."

"Wait, what?"

"If I'm not, it'll be your turn to gamble. Use your powers to get out of here."
"The powers you specifically told me were too dangerous to use?" Ryou said, keeping his voice low with an effort. "Why are you saying you'll do this all by yourself? There's five of them. And you're still injured."

"Do you know how to fight?"

"...No."

"That's why I'm going by myself. And yeah, I'll be straight with you, you might end up on the outside of the world with the Furies all around you if you use your magic. But those fuckers will send you to much the same place, only it'll be longer and a lot more painful. Might as well take a shortcut. Hopefully you'll pull a real trick out of your hat and get back to your country. It could happen; you did it once before, even if it was only from the no man's land. The homing instinct is strong. Now stay here and."

Darius broke off as Ryou grabbed him by the wrist and stopped him from getting to his feet. "Wait, there's got to be another way to deal with these people."

"Deal? Did you not see what they did to that summering camp back there?"

"You said it wasn't them."

"It'll be more of the same. Soldiers are dangerous men, magian. I've been in the army since I was fifteen, I've learned to order them, discipline them and earn their respect, and even I can't stop the occasional infighting and unsanctioned looting. Soldiers who've deserted and lost whatever control their leaders had over them are lower than dogs and more dangerous than rabid wolves."

"You were ready to cut a deal with the border crossers," Ryou reminded him.

Darius frowned. "Yeah, because if they hadn't taken it, I could have beaten the shit out of them. They weren't fighters, just scrappers. At five against one, these guys are going to kill me if I don't get the drop on them. I'm good, but I'm not that damned good."

"So you're just going to attack them like that? Charge in and hack at them?"

"No," answered Darius with a heavy look, "I'm going to crawl nearer, wait until some of them are asleep, and then I'll try to creep in, score a weapon and slit a few throats before things get noisy."

Ryou pushed down the instinctive recoil of a civilized man at the notion of cutting anyone's throat in real life, and focused on more practical concerns. "How easy will that be? Didn't you just say you couldn't get near the one guarding the horses?"

"Not easy at all, which is why I'm telling you to get ready to run for it any way you can," answered Darius in a quiet yet steely voice.

"In the interest of both our safeties, can I offer another suggestion?" Ryou countered just as firmly.

They stared at each other for a few tense seconds, then Darius settled back down in the thicket. "I got some time to kill while I wait for them to get drunk and sleepy, so go ahead."

Darius told Ryou his plan was perfectly stupid; so stupid it might even work, which was what Ryou
was counting on. In his experience gleaned from dealing with the sales forces of multinational corporations, the bigger, bolder and more appealing the misdirection, the easier it was to get people to swallow it.

So instead of creeping towards the campfire, he stopped fifty yards away and shouted: "Help! Can you hear me? Help me!"

The sound of men getting ready to settle down for the night abruptly ceased. Then Ryou heard a succession of weapons being drawn.

"No, you stay here," someone barked in the camp up ahead. "You and you, come with me."

Ryou felt a flash of relief that he'd understood the harsh order. Darius was the only person he'd spoken to so far in this strange world, and though his traveling companion assured him that Ryou had somehow broken the Curse of Babel, it was hard to believe. When Darius spoke, his lips moved in time with his words, yet Ryou could swear he was hearing Japanese. Hopefully the reverse was true too, and these men would not notice anything odd about Ryou's speech.

"Here, over here!" Ryou shouted helpfully, directing towards his position the feet finding their way through long grass and bracken in the dark.

Three men surrounded him a moment later. Two of them did no more than glance at him, then they turned away, eyes darting to the night around them. They were armed with strongly curved bows no longer than their arm, arrows already notched. The third man stopped in front of Ryou. He had a large chest like a barrel encased in boiled leather armor, but something about him reminded Ryou of the suit-and-tie VIPs he frequently dealt with; an air of self-assurance and command.

"Who the fuck are you?" he asked. He had a short sword pointed at Ryou's chest.

"Please- I'm unarmed." Ryou stayed kneeling, though he leaned away from the blade. "I- I'm lost, I've not eaten in days. Can you please help me? Just a bit of food..."

The large man split his time between staring suspiciously out into the night and giving Ryou a disbelieving look.

"Gex?" someone back at the camp shouted, making the horses whiny and stamp. "Don't stay out there, regroup."

Gex, if this was him, gave Ryou a piercing look. Ryou met his gaze, trying to look pitiful. Finally Gex reached down and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Coming."

"What you got?"

"Fuck if I know."

Ryou made pained noises and exaggerated his limp as he was half walked, half dragged back to camp.

Gex shoved him forward. Ryou staggered and almost fell into the campfire. The heat didn't dispel the chill he felt as he remembered four skulls near a smear of ashes in a pile of rubbish...

"Gex?" A man spoke tightly from off to Ryou's right, near where the horses were tethered. "If there's more, the fire makes us a target."

"I don't think there's more. Come look at this, Gaius. It's an odd one."
"Get him talking. I'm going to take a look around. Chozz, watch the horses."

One of the men grunted and marched off towards the animals without a backward glance, an arrow still notched in his bow. The last two were at the edge of where the campfire threw its light, looking dutifully out into the night. Ryō's heart was tight with tension. These men were more disciplined than he'd thought. Darius was right, this was a stupid plan. Too late to worry about it now though.

"Are you soldiers?" Ryō asked, looking around. Three rolls of blankets were laid out around the fire, much more comfortable than the ground Ryō had been sleeping on for four nights now. The camp was littered with sacks, hobnailed sandals, a javelin resting against a stunted tree off to one side, a large uncorked jug, and some flat tin squares with scrapes of food on them, dropped near a pot blackened by the fire.

Ryō's question didn't earn him any friends. Gex acted as if Ryō had never opened his mouth, but the two men at the edge of the camp glanced back at Ryō with scowls. One of them didn't have any front teeth left, it made the grimace he threw at Ryō even more sinister. These were certainly deserters, then, and did not like to be reminded of the fact. But it'd been a logical question to ask for someone who had not known about their camp beforehand.

"Who are you?" Gex asked Ryō. In the light of the fire, his face and hair were filthy and he hadn't shaved in days. A huge pinkish wart, the size of Ryō's thumb, hung from the side of one eye, twisting it out of shape. He stank as he leaned forward. In the light of the fire, Ryō guessed that this frightening fat man was around thirty.

"Um, my name is Ujiie Ryō," answered Ryō, looking him straight in the face and not letting his eyes stray to the wart or to the other men around them. "I was traveling with an escort when we were attacked by enemies of my family. My guards were killed, but I managed to escape. I couldn't find the road again, my horse got away on the first night, um, I've been walking for days. My shoes disintegrated this morning...I didn't think I could go on, but then I saw your fire..."

Gex's gaze fell to Ryō's bare feet, the state of which did indeed bolster his claim. Ryō looked appropriately wan and tired, and if Gex listened closely he'd hear the rumblings of Ryō's stomach at the smell of food from the pot, despite the clench of tension in his gut. But Gex seemed awfully intrigued by Ryō's outfit, too. Ryō had ditched the tie and jacket, but he'd kept the coat and shirt, and there wasn't much he could do about his pants. He didn't think he looked much like a native, especially compared to these men. There was not one piece of armor that matched another amongst these soldiers, but they definitely had more in common with the way Darius was dressed the first time Ryō had met him rather than with Tokyo salarymen.

"Look..." Ryō licked his lips, his tension not at all faked, though he was deliberate in letting it show. "My family is rich. I don't have any money on me, I can't pay for food, but if you can- if you can escort me back to my country, my father will give you a rich reward."

"How much?" said one of the guards instantly, turning Ryō's way. Ryō felt a flutter of hope. He was here as a distraction, but the venal question itself might be a way of getting out of this without risk or bloodshed.

"Oh, my father is a rich merchant and I'm his oldest son. He'll pay one hundred aurei to get me back safely," said Ryō. It was the sum Darius had suggested when Ryō had asked what kind of bribe would be both appealing yet believable. Ryō didn't know if this was pocket money and change he was talking about, or if it would hit the considerable limit of his visa card in local currency.

"Keep a watch out, there," Gex told the deserter who'd taken a couple of steps in towards the fire, eyes shining with sudden greed. The command was given absently, and Gex didn't repeat it when
the man merely stopped where he was and only half turned back to his lookout. "Where you from?" he asked Ryou.

"Assyria," answered Ryou. It was a gamble, but if these men could be bribed to get him and Darius back...

"Fuck," muttered the man near the horses. He'd drifted a little closer too.

"Fuck," muttered the man near the horses. He'd drifted a little closer too.

Gex scratched his thick jowl, a rasping noise louder than the fire's crackle. "Hm."

"Maybe more than a hundred," said Ryou, a chill spreading through him as he felt the wisps of a chance slipping out of his hands. He didn't try to appeal to Gex's kindness. Gex had been staring at him all along, but he hadn't once looked at Ryou in any way that suggested he thought of Ryou as a person in need of help, or a fellow human being at all. If Ryou could not convince him, or if Gex thought he was in any way a danger, the man would slit Ryou's throat with less thought than he would eat a meal. Ryou had known, from the way Darius had talked about them, that these men were dangerous and callous, but now that he was the focus of Gex's attention, he felt the truth of it.

"Gex?" said the toothless man. "You think he's telling the truth?"

"Does it matter?" Gex answered, eyes still moodily pinning Ryou where he sat.

"Huh? But, man, a hundred, Gex. A hundred hard ones!"

"Yeah, as long as we get him home to daddy," sneered Chozz, now standing near the rump of the nearest horse, facing outwards with a notched arrow in his bow but his attention towards the fire. "A hundred Emperors to get him back to Assyria and a nice clean rope thrown in by the Bitch King's men to go with it. We can get one aureus for him down the road, that's shorter."

"Did I hear that fucker right? Did he say he was from Assyria?" growled the fifth man, appearing out of the night near the end of the line of tethered horses. He patted one of them on the muzzle as he passed, then grabbed Chozz and shoved him off towards the back of the camp. "Stay at your post, asshole."

"Sorry, Gaius," said Chozz, cringing. He gripped his weapon and marched off towards the last horse in line.

Chozz and the two other unnamed soldiers were thin, stooped and had the fidgety movements of vermin; Gaius was more like Gex, someone used to giving orders as well as receiving them. His square face was deeply lined, though he was probably in his late twenties, like Ryou. The right side of his face was a deeply ridged mess of pink scarring where his ear should have been. Over a long tunic he wore a chest-plate of leather enforced with crudely decorated metal circles over chest and belly, a belt with leather bands hanging to his knees, and sandals strapped up the ankle. He was giving Ryou a look that suggested he instantly mistrusted and disliked him, but Ryou had seen him give Chozz the same, so it might not signify much.

"Says he's some rich bastard's son from Assyria." Gex straightened up and stepped back. "That buddy of yours, Aurelius Vibius Arvina, he'll pay twenty denarii for Alliance soldiers and one aureus for Assyrian and Aksumite, right? Think we can give him this one?"

It'd been decided so offhandedly, without even a glance his way, that Ryou took a second to figure out that Plan B had failed. This meant his life now depended on Plan A working...

Gaius came to a stop before Ryou and looked down at him. "Aurelius'd take any Assyrian, man, woman or child; he won't be picky as long as he and the Tribune get their cut."
"Works for me," said one of the others with a snicker, which he abruptly interrupted when Gaius tossed his short bow at him to hold with a bit more force than necessary.

Then Gaius took a step forward and punched Ryou square in the face.

Ryou hit the earth with a thump, stunned.

Strong hands grasped his coat's collar and pulled him up again. Ryou twitched, mind lucid but his body unable to respond.

"If you bastards didn't have oysters for eyes, you'd see this fucker is as Assyrian as I am," said Gaius. "We ain't getting squat except for a reason why he's here. Talk. Who are you?"

Pain was unfurling from the left side of Ryou's face and radiating all the way down to his neck and shoulders. He couldn't open one of his eyes fully, and he couldn't bring Gaius's face into focus. Concussion? No, he'd lost his glasses, that's why everything looked a little fuzzy. That notched up his panic even more than the vicious punch.

He did see, in a blur, that hard fist drawing back again. Ryou flinched and threw up his hands to protect his face. His legs were too rubbery to run away, or even let him stand; he was dangling from Gaius's hold. Every gasp of air through his mouth tasted of copper, and he could feel drops of blood trickle down from his nose and fall off his chin.

"Please-" the blow wasn't falling yet. "Please- I can pay you- just get me to-"

He didn't even see it this time, the world just jerked and went dark. When Ryou blinked it back again, he was a foot away from the nearest burning branch, face in the cinders. Then the pain came galloping back, a second behind consciousness but gaining fast. Ryou wondered what Gaius had broken; the pain was too broad to tell, spreading from his jaw where the second punch had landed and over the whole left side of his face. He scrabbled in the dirt, trying to shove himself away.

The world turned right side up again as he was once more hauled up by the coat.

Gaius waited until Ryou had blinked away the sparkles of darkness and was focusing on him again. "Are there more of you out there?" he asked in a voice as menacing as another raised fist.

With every ounce of considerable self-control Ryou possessed, he kept his shortsighted eyes riveted on Gaius's. His gaze did not twitch away to see if help was coming. It would come, or it would not. Pain would come, or it would not. Fear was happening to his body, shaking in Gaius's grasp. It felt miles away from Ryou's mind, still clear and focused on what he had to do. Only the pain had breached the distance, and Ryou was doing his best to conquer that too. Despite the casual brutality, he felt instinctively that Gaius was not doing this randomly; Gaius would be watching Ryou's expression and particularly his eyes right now, looking for the betraying flicker of a glance searching for outside intervention. Ryou did not look away. Beyond that, he didn't try to do any acting. He'd never been good at it. He showed Gaius what he'd showed the last bully who'd punched him in the face like that, almost fifteen years ago. Absolutely nothing.

Gaius did not find that off-putting, but then again he was doing this for business, not for fun. He dropped Ryou, and then his foot shot out and caught Ryou in the stomach as the latter fell forward. Ryou hit the ground with a thud, fighting the pain and a surging rise of nausea. He was still in possession of his faculties, but the pain was gaining on that now, he was afraid he might slip up. He could not slip up.

He lay panting in the dirt, muscles clenching in anticipation. A footstep near his shoulder made him
flinch and roll into a ball on instinct. Somebody nearby laughed.

Gaius didn't kick him again. He took three steps around Ryou and crouched near the fire. Then he went back to his previous position. Ryou waited, still hunched over, but when nothing was said, and the men around him fell silent, he finally looked up.

"These yours?" said Gaius. He was holding out Ryou's glasses.

If Ryou had ever been an optimist, he'd have hoped at that point that his helplessness had convinced these men he was in earnest. As it were, he was not an optimist, but he still couldn't see what Gaius was getting at.

"Here, put them on." Gaius tossed them to the ground in front of Ryou.

Ryou licked his lips, tasted blood. He slowly reached towards his glasses, expecting a sandal to come crashing down on them or on his fingers, or on both. But Gaius didn't move. Ryou put on his glasses, his hands shaking so hard in reaction that it took him two tries. When he looked up, Gaius was watching him with an unreadable expression.

"Can you see better now?" Gaius asked.

The simulacrum of consideration in his voice made Ryou's skin crawl. He tried to move his lips to once more repeat that he could pay, but Gaius reached out and caught his aching jaw in his fingers. Then there was a *ching* and Ryou was looking at a short knife hovering in front of his eyes; the wooden handle was crude and it'd been sharpened so many times the blade looked like whittled bamboo, but it was undoubtedly sharp. It was in front of his eyes long enough for him to get a good look at it, and then it was placed against his cheek. The metal was cold in the night air.

"Talk or I start cutting," said Gaius.

Ryou stared at him, but peripherally he was aware they had an audience now. He couldn't take the risk of looking around, but he thought everyone except for Chozz was gathered around to see this bit.

"Guy's frozen stiff," one of them laughed.

"Like a rabbit starin' at a weasel," said the toothless man. "Heeey, look at those eyes, so narrow. Ever seen the like? Gaius is right, Assyrian my ass."

"Wait-" Ryou whispered, eyes still fastened on his tormentor's. His jaw ached but he kept on speaking, a soft thread of words. "Please- don't- can pay-"

Gaius's eyes narrowed. Ryou couldn't tell if it was anger or doubt...

"Don't damage him too much. Don't want him croaking before we can get our twenty denarii," said Gex. Ryou could see him over Gaius's shoulder; the large soldier had sat down near the cooking pot a few feet away and was chewing on a strip of jerky. Though it was obvious the three rodents were followers, it was less clear who, of Gex or Gaius, was the actual leader of this band.

"We're not getting anything for this wimp," Gaius sneered.

"Hit him in the face a few more times. He'll be so bruised, we can say he's from one of the Free Cities; that'll count as Alliance. And by then he'll be ready to swear he's from the moon just to get away from you. Your buddy Aurelius will take him off our hands."
Ryou's face was only a foot away from Gaius's; close enough to see an ugly light go through the other man's eyes. "He's not my buddy."

A sharp pain. Ryou flinched away from the knife that had cut into his right cheek.

"Aurelius can look down at you for what you are, Gaius, but what we all are, are guys who can use twenty denarii, so don't kill him," said Gex philosophically before cleaning a gap between his teeth with his finger.

"I won't kill him," Gaius said, clearly irritated by both the words and the suggestion he was about to lose his temper and cost them a source of revenue. The knife was resting against Ryou's cheek once more. The first cut was starting to sting in pulsing waves. The men around them were snickering. It sounded like even more of them now- no, that was the horses whinnying in the background, a noise of alarm.

In Ryou's field of vision, Gaius suddenly looked up and over his shoulder, eyes narrowed.

Gaius's move gave Ryou a clear view of the back of the camp, so he saw Darius stepping into the light, an arrow notched on Chozz's recurve bow, two others held in the hand pulling back the string.

The arrow left the bow with a *clack*. One of the men standing two feet away from Ryou jerked and fell to the ground.

Gaius dropped Ryou and spun around, reaching for the sword hanging from his belt. Suddenly bereft of support, Ryou slumped forward. He managed to catch himself on his forearms before he took a painful nosedive into the dirt.

When he looked up, the first thing he saw was Gex staggering away from the pot, hands grasping an arrow protruding from his thick neck. Blood poured out of the wound and from his mouth. If he was making a sound, Ryou couldn't hear it over the scream of horses in the background.

Darius flicked the last arrow around his fingers and fitted it to the bowstring in one fluid, rapid movement. But Gaius was already on him. Darius fired at close range, missed - without skipping a beat he raised the bow and caught a thrust from Gaius's short blade on the upper curve. He then shoved bow, weapon and soldier away with one hard thrust. Darius spun around while Gaius was still staggering, pulling a short sword from the belt he'd not had half an hour before. Three long strides brought him over to the deserter standing on the other side of the fire, toothless mouth still gaping wide. The man had a bow and arrow too, but he was still fitting the two together, movements ragged with shock, when Darius lunged at him. The deserter lifted his weapon in an attempt to shield himself. Darius's hand dipped and punched the blade into the man's belly from beneath the bow. The deserter doubled over, coughed wetly and fell. Darius spun to face Gaius, stance low, drawing a dagger from the back of his sword belt and holding it in his left hand.

Gaius had made no move to help his fellow soldier. He'd taken advantage of the other man's demise to go grab a helmet and a high, rectangular shield from where it'd been leaning against a backpack.

One of the horses ripped out its picket and bolted, followed by another. The others pulled helplessly at their ropes.

Arm fitted through the strap of the shield, Gaius stared at Darius in the firelight. Then he glanced around...at Ryou.

Ryou reacted as quickly as he could. He staggered to his feet and fell forward more than ran to a spot behind Darius.
Gaius grimaced. "So that's how it is. You should've shot me first, asshole. If you'd missed and hit your little friend, you'd have been giving him a better death than I will. As for you, you're Assyrian without a doubt. And I think I'll be getting more than one aureus by the looks of you," he added, giving Darius's face, stance and braces a calculating look.

"Isn't bounty hunting falling a bit low for a Praetorian?" asked Darius, and Ryou could hear the cutting smirk in his voice. "Who's this Aurelius I heard you mention, your one-time Centurion? Deserters from the Legion are traditionally dragged behind their leader's chariot, but he gives you odd jobs and money instead. You must have been a good man once. He must feel so very sorry for you."

Gaius had that ugly look in his face again. "You-...I fought a lot of your kind, I've got ten years of campaign behind me-"

"Yeah, they're behind you alright," said Darius, leaping forward. He circled Gaius, who turned to face him with the shield. Gaius shouted, a rough holler as he charged forward, shield punching out-then he stopped and turned as Darius evaded it and dodged around him, trying to come in from the side.

"Fuck, you're one of the Beast's curs, aren't you," Gaius spat.

"And proud of it," said Darius, darting in again.

Like a hound baiting a bear, Darius dodged from one side to the other, nipping in with his sword. Gaius had to turn violently this way and that to keep the shield between them.

Then Darius stopped and glanced quickly behind him, checking his position in relation to the fire. In that split second Gaius surged forward and tried to ram him. The short sword drew back sharply to dart forward the moment Darius was knocked back or down-

Darius threw himself to the right to stay away from that killing thrust, and also out of reach of what was in essence a battering weapon. A danger and an obstacle for an unarmored fighter; well-honed defense and offense combined. To Ryou, heart in his mouth, it looked impregnable. He prudently moved away, to the other side of the fire so that he could use it as a barrier against Gaius if the Roman attacked him. But so far nobody was paying him any attention.

"What's wrong, Assyrian, can't do it without your horse?" Gaius said, a little breathless, as Darius circled him again. "You dickless cowards are only good for riding and shooting-"

Darius darted in. Gaius had the shield between them again. It bashed out and the short sword stabbed forward, but it'd just been a feint. Darius had immediately moved back again.

The horses were whickering worriedly, but other than that the only noise in the camp was the stomp of feet and both men breathing heavily. Particularly the Roman...Ryou licked his lips, then took a swipe at the blood caking them, eyes fixed on the fighters. The Roman wasn't moving as much as Darius, but he was fully armored and carrying that big shield, and he was a heavier man to start with. If Darius could wear him out-

Darius was certainly trying to do something. Ryou could feel it, see it in the way his moves - go in, feint, get out quickly - looked rehearsed. As for Gaius, each bash-and-stab gesture was rigorously identical to the next; he must have repeated that sequence a hundred - a thousand times before.

Darius dodged in one more time-

- and this time he ducked, body low.
Gaius lashed out with the shield— but Darius had stopped just out of reach and at an angle where the bulk of the shield was obstructing Gaius's immediate line of sight.

The instant the shield was out—a bare two inches from Darius's position, that must have been a calculated move born of observation—Darius hurled himself forward to Gaius's left, away from the short sword jabbing thin air. Darius slammed full-bodied into the shield as it was being drawn back; spun against it and turned and struck at Gaius's head with the sword and the full force of his spin behind it. He continued to turn and brought the dagger to bear, stepping forward and stabbing at Gaius's back near the neck as the Roman staggered forward.

Gaius fell to the ground with a thud Ryou felt through his bare feet, the shield caught beneath him. His legs spasmed once and then he didn't move again. The round helmet he'd worn had fallen, the flap of metal covering the back of his neck dented with the force of Darius's blow. Blood was flowing and starting to drip down his throat into the dirt.

Darius crouched over the body, breathing heavily. Ryou heard him mutter between gasps for air, "...A ten year veteran...but so am I...loser..."

Ryou found he'd sunk down to the ground as well as the release of tension turned his legs to water.

The horses were snorting and rolling their eyes, white in the darkness. Darius wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then spat at the ground. As far as Ryou could see, he hadn't been injured, but he was holding his side now in a way that suggested he was in pain. It was a good thing he'd gotten Gaius when he had.

Darius shook himself like a dog getting out of a stream. Then he stood and walked over to Gex. The large man had both hands around the arrow, which was shaking, Ryou could see it from where he was. Darius looked down at him, dispassionate, then he lifted his sword straight up, both hands on the hilt, and—

Ryou managed to twitch his gaze away, but he couldn't do anything about the meaty sound, the bloodied gargle and the threshing noise of a body jerking in bloodied ash and mud. Ryou took off his glasses with a hand that was shaking, felt gingerly at the left side of his face, and let the pain of his examination distract him as Darius walked around the rest of the camp and made sure of the other deserters.

Then a pair of bare feet stopped in Ryou's blurred field of vision. Ryou put on his glasses as Darius crouched down before him, sword propped between them like a staff. Darius's face was hard, eyes unblinking.

"That's done, and we're safe. But I have to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"You do know that it'd have been safer for me to kill the guard, free the horses, scatter them and make off on one of them in the confusion, leaving you to get tortured to death. Right?"

"I guess so," Ryou answered.

Darius clenched his teeth. Then he said, "Now, I know you're not dumb. Why did you suggest this stupid plan of yours? I never bound myself at any time to keeping you safe; in fact I damn well told you I could not promise to take you home four days ago. Why did you take the risk of trusting me like that?"

Ryou felt at his sore jaw. "Hm. 'Cause you didn't promise."
Darius looked confused.

"Besides, you'd rather fight than run away," Ryou added.

Darius let out a snort that sounded almost amused. "You got me figured out. I guess I'm not that hard to read. Unlike you."

He shoved against his thighs to stand up. Ryou craned his neck to find his friend looking down at him.

"I just don't get you. I've been a commander in the Assyrian army for years, I thought I could read men by now, but I just don't get you. If you're after something, I'm damned if I know what. If you're not, then you're either brave, crazy or selfless, and I just can't decide. But I do know one thing now, Uchee Ryou."

"Ujiie," said Ryou, tentatively taking the hand extended before him.

Darius pulled him to his feet. Ryou staggered, his legs still weak, and Darius caught him against his chest as if he'd expected it.

"I know you're damn tough," said Darius, face inches away from Ryou's. "That big Praetorian was knocking you all about the camp and you didn't squeal, cry for my help or even look away. You're definitely built like a magian rather than a soldier, but you could teach a whole phalanx the meaning of a backbone."

Ryou had the horrible certainty he was blushing, an unparalleled slip of his composure; the bruises and the firelight probably covered for him as he turned his face away and muttered dismissively, "It would have killed us both if I'd let them know you were there."

"Well yeah, but that's hard to remember when the guy's threatening to cut bits off your face," said Darius nonchalantly, turning and looping Ryou's arm over his shoulder. If he felt Ryou's shudder, he hopefully attributed it to the pain. "Come on, let's get away from this charnel house. I'll put you down near the river and go make sure of the remaining horses."

Ryou mumbled something indistinct, glad to get away from the fire and the corpses. He'd perpetrated that, or at least helped bring it about. Those men weren't anonymous extras in a movie drama; they'd had faces, scars, names, they'd been brutal and murderous, and now they were dead and would never eat from that pot or warm themselves by a fire again. What they were going to do to him did not in any way correct that fact; it just made it easier to deal with. Ryou knew he was going to feel torn about all this in the days to come, as reason and necessity battled with the knowledge that five men were dead with his help. Right now, though, shock and a few blows to the head were numbing everything. The only thing Ryou was glad of was to get away from the camp where one of the bodies, that of the nameless deserter who'd been felled by Darius's first arrow, was still twitching spastically and voiding itself with a windy gurgle that left nothing to the imagination.

"Here, sit here." Darius helped him down onto a half-rotted tree trunk near the river, then he disappeared and returned a moment later with a red scarf in his hands. He dipped it into the water and applied it to Ryou's face. Ryou wished he could tell Darius that this was not necessary and that even if it was, it hurt more than he liked, but all that would involve talking, and Darius's hand on his shoulder stopped him from leaning away.

"The cut is shallow. The rest doesn't look too bad, nothing broken at any rate," said Darius, tilting Ryou's head to get a better view of his face in the moonlight. "He was just warming you up, you know that, right?"
Ryou made an affirmative noise that did not involve moving his jaw or mouth.

"'Course, they weren't going to kill you outright. Nobody ever got anything from a dead body. I suppose that was a bit reassuring."

Ryou hadn't been thinking in quite those terms...

"They said they wanted to sell me...to..."

"Yeah, to some Roman. They get people from Assyria, Aksum or the Free Cities, and present them to Roma Praetorium as conquests even if the poor bastards have never been near a battlefield. They're not supposed to, of course, but the Tribunes let it slide. It's not just that they get a cut, and a morsel of honor. It's part of the war. Disrupts our lines of trade, makes Alliance merchants afraid of venturing out of their safe zones. Here, hold it here." Darius slipped off Ryou's glasses and held the cold cloth higher up near his temple where the first blow had landed. "You're going to be a sight tomorrow."

Ryou shrugged using only his right side. He knew what he looked like with a black eye. After the incident with the president back when Ryou was thirteen, he'd somehow lost the ability to make friends or fit in. His reputation for being a stuck up loner earned him some bullying from his peers. In his exclusive boy's school whose education principles had stayed firmly stuck at turn-of-the-century, such things were seen as character forming. When someone had somehow guessed his inclinations, the notion that here was some stuck up loner girly boy who could be further isolated, terrified and made to cry had attracted larger predators...Though really, the efforts of his one-time sempais were child's play next to what had happened and what could have happened tonight. Maybe it was the near-concussion from Gaius's ministrations, but Ryou felt like he was reaching back over the years to that fifteen year old self battling pain and humiliation, and a worse sense that he deserved them both, his only pride being that he wasn't going to let the bastards see any of this. He felt like he was holding that young boy in his arms the way Darius had held him earlier and telling him, "Don't worry, those kids have no idea what a real beating is. A man who makes them look like toddlers thinks you're tough rather than a geeky faggot, so don't let them get to you."

Ryou blinked as he realized he was drifting off, the cloth nearly slipping from his face. Darius was nearby. Ryou had been peripherally aware that Darius was checking his glasses for damage, but now they were on Darius's nose, and he was squinting and giving the world around him puzzled looks.

He removed them when he realized Ryou was watching. "I can't see how you can wear the damned things, everything is warped."

"That's because we don't have the same eyesight; we'd need different glasses," said Ryou, face aching all over again as an expression battled to make it onto his bruised features.

"I don't need spectacles," Darius groused, leaning over to put them back on Ryou's nose.

Ryou started to chuckle helplessly, even though it hurt. It was like something inside him was slowly unwinding.

"And it's now of all times that I get to see you laugh." Darius's look was a blend of exasperated amusement. "I just don't get you. Oh well, stay here. I'm going to take care of things." He made a vague gesture back at the camp before disappearing once more into the night.

Ryou's laugh drained away, leaving him breathing easily for what felt like the first time in hours. He stared out at the river, caught a little fleck of light where a fish had flashed a fin in the moonlight. The night was cold, the grass-scented air fresh in his mouth and on his bruised face. He was in some pain,
and immensely happy to be alive right at this moment.

That night, Ryou rested near the embers of the fire. Darius had not wanted to take a chance other predators out there might see a blaze. But Ryou was warm, wrapped as he was in a dead man's horse blanket. Darius did not sleep near him; he was resting against a tree, a javelin, sword and bow at hand. When Ryou looked over, he'd see his friend nodding at times, but any small noise in the underbrush brought Darius's head up immediately.

Ryou wasn't sleeping much either; the pain in the jaw and leftover adrenaline were banishing sleep. Darius had dragged the bodies away to a spot away from both the camp and the river. Ryou could hear creatures growling and yapping at each other in that direction, and the sound of tugging and ripping. It didn't make him feel anything.

Ryou watched the stars wheel above him. It was as if he'd stumbled headlong into this strange world a week ago, and was now running full speed ahead because he'd fall if he tried to stop. Every step was taking him further away from his former life and self, and Ryou wondered when it would be too late for him to ever get back, assuming that time was not already well and truly past.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing gets Mal's lil' heart beating like action, male bonding and bloodshed. Does this make me weird? Isn't that question well and truly answered by now? Crits, comments and the directions to some good psychiatric help are all welcome.
Dawn woke Ryou from a light doze. While drifting in a somnolent state, he heard Darius yawn, stand up and move off into the bushes for a few minutes.

"You awake, Ryou?" Darius asked as he returned, fitting the jogging pants back under the buckle of his sword belt.

"Yes." Ryou sat up and felt gingerly at the left side of his face. It was swollen, his left eye couldn't open more than a crack, but it was hurting less already.

Darius stretched, rolled his shoulders and then nodded at the fireplace. "Know how to make a meal out of hard tack, soaked jerky and lard?"

"No," answered Ryou without having to ponder the question much. It was only the cramping ache of a stomach that had not seen much food these past five days that stopped him from saying, "Neither do I want to."

"Know how to wash clothes?" Darius was in a good mood this morning, if the undertone of teasing was any indication.

"I believe I can manage that," replied Ryou with a good ladle of reserved dignity, since Darius was undoubtedly expecting something along those lines. He wondered how that looked, coming out of his puffy, black-and-blue face. Pretty funny, from the way Darius chuckled.

"You do that, then. Here, I'll pick them out for you. Scrub them against a rock and then keep them in the water for a good while. It'll drown the vermin."

"I'll do my best," Ryou muttered, giving the nearest pack an unenthusiastic look.

Breakfast was as disgusting as Ryou had surmised, but he ate two bowls without pause. It was amazing what one could swallow if one was hungry enough. Darius then left with the mare to try to find the missing horses. When he eventually came back with the two that had gotten away, he built a new fire, as smokeless as possible, and put a plump rabbit he'd shot with the bow to roast. Then he went systematically through the dead men's belongings, taking out anything valuable. In the meantime, Ryou had washed the clothes as well as he could without soap, and spread them out to dry on the bracken.

After some roast rabbit and hard biscuits they had to dip in a mixture of river water and vinegary wine to eat, they dressed in the damp clothes. These were worn, non-descript, with patches and bald spots where armor had rubbed. The short woolen pants and shirt were itchy (it could have been psychosomatic, due to Darius's former mention of vermin). The long-sleeved tunic of thick linen felt stiff and odd, especially where it was reinforced with leather patches across the chest. Ryou's feet were too small for the thick boots Darius first had him try; he had to make do with a pair of shoes made from one piece of leather wrapping up over his foot, laced up and around the ankle, with a thicker sole of leather attached with hobnails that made a clatter when he walked across pebbles near
the river. They were not warm, even after Darius showed him how to wrap his feet in woolen tubes beneath the shoe. Seeing Darius pulling on a pair of open-toed sandals made Ryou's feet feel even colder.

It felt wonderful to ditch the suit Ryou had worn for the last five days, most of them spent hiking and sweating, but he did wonder, as he looked down at himself in bemusement, what his subordinates would say if they could see him now.

Darius for his part had pulled on a long tunic which, from the bagginess around the middle, probably belonged to Gex. He was still wearing the jogging pants beneath that.

"They're comfortable," he said with a shrug when he caught Ryou looking askance at them. Then he gestured at the packs he'd ransacked, contents laid out all over the campground. "We'll take essentials and leave the rest. Above all, don't take anything belonging to that Roman."

"Isn't that his top you're pulling on?" Ryou asked.

"This thing?" Darius settled the heavy tunic over his other one with a couple of tugs and then patted the metal reinforcements. "This isn't his, not originally; he must have stolen it from some dead soldier on the battlefield when he ran for it. Better than walking around in his segmented mail for the first patrol to find him and drag him back. Just don't take any spoils without checking with me first, though. The last thing we want is to have anything of his on us if we get stopped by the Praetorians. The less we look like soldiers or bandits, the better. We'll say we're two travelers going to the local border Path. I'll do the talking; you just keep quiet and try to look dumb."

"Are we likely to meet any?"

"I have no idea. Esma Deva has driven His chariot through this land, and his children have laid waste to men and cattle," said Darius. Ryou had by now figured out his friend was partially quoting from some text when he used that tone and formal words. "Who knows what's left anymore. The patrols aren't straying far from the road if these bastards were here, bold as daylight, that's for sure. Now, I've got an important question for you, Ryou."

"Yes?" said Ryou, looking up from the long knife Darius had insisted he carry in a scabbard tied to his forearm.

"Have you ever ridden a horse?"

Movie actors made it look easy. Then again, they had blue screen projections behind them to simulate speed, when they weren't just bouncing up and down on a prop. Even when they did ride for real, they probably had better equipment.

Ryou had never ridden before, but he did know what a proper saddle was supposed to look like. Here he was supposed to make do with a blanket and a rectangular leather padding thrown over the horse's back and held in place by cinches. The one around the horse's withers strapped down a wooden attachment that served as pommel and from which dangled two ropes with hoops at the end. They gave only minimum stability. Ryou could put less than half his weight on this arrangement before the whole thing moved under foot, the horse sidestepped towards him and Ryou either hopped up and down frantically to keep his balance or landed in the dirt.

In the end, Darius had to help him into the saddle. Ryou thought the whole getup was rickety and
primitive. Darius, however, was ecstatic that the Roman - the most likely originator - had had the
good taste to provide his looters with such up-to-date arrangements instead of leaving them to make
do with a pad and surcingle. Ryou didn't know what a pad and surcingle were, but decided to count
his blessings without inquiring further.

They reached a paved road an hour after breaking camp. Ryou had only fallen off his horse twice,
which Darius assured him was quite good for a first time rider. They'd let the stallion and the mare
run free; "A gift to the herders, if they ever come this way again," Darius said philosophically. The
extra gelding carried the baggage they'd kept from the campsite, packed into two satchels. The horse
followed them obediently at the prompt of a long lead Darius tied to his own animal's rear cinch. The
day was cool, even with the sun overhead. The wind blew in the tall grass and sparse trees. The
road, when they reached it, evened out the horses' pace. It was well-paved, almost three meters wide,
and totally deserted. Darius picked a direction at random and they rode for another half hour before
spotting a stone marker. Darius looked pleased at what the pictograms told him.

"There's a way station not too far along the road. They'll know how far the border is, and we can get
some rations. I also need information."

"Won't it have suffered the same fate as that trappers' camp?"

"On an Imperial road? Don't bring bad luck by saying such things," Darius muttered with conviction,
as if Ryou's words could really bring death and destruction in their wake. "If the Praetorians have
lost their grip on this province that badly, then I definitely want to know about it sooner rather than
later. Come on."

"What about the patrols on the road?" Ryou asked, voice choppy as his horse decided to suddenly
pick up the pace for no discernable reason. "Did you hear what Gaius said last night?"

"About the bounty for Assyrian soldiers? Yeah, his voice carried."

Ryou pulled tentatively on the reins so that he wouldn't outpace Darius. He half expected the horse
to abruptly stop and shake itself like last time - that'd been Ryou's second spill - but no, this time the
bloody animal cooperated. Ryou had the feeling it was more for the company of Darius's horse than
due to his own powers of persuasion.

"The Assyrians are at war with the Romans, right?" he asked, attention still mostly on his balance.

"At war with the most powerful Empire ever seen? Hell no, that'd be insane," said Darius, riding as
easily as if he were sitting in an armchair.

That wasn't what Ryou had expected. "You aren't?"

"No. To start with, our countries are too far from each other. The Per Gathas don't allow armies to
march through the Paths of Zaratusra. Troops have to walk hundreds of miles across country to get
anywhere. For centuries, Assyria, Aksum, Hatti-Ulep and other large countries were at peace and
even friendly with the Imperium; we'd send envoys, trade when we could, and join forces hunting
down bandit tribes hiding in the barbarian lands too far from any of us to be properly civilized. Or so
my tutors taught me. It was long ago. I was supposed to read about it from some moldy old text at
one point - I can read, I was taught when I was still young," he added, as if Ryou might have been in
any doubt about it. "It was all about boring treaties instead of warfare. I lost the damned thing at the
first opportunity and went out riding instead. My father hammered me for that, but it was well worth
it. I cared more about learning to fight than worrying about dead peace pacts. By age six all us
children knew that my generation would be the one to fight the Romans openly, whatever the tutors
said."
Ryou looked at him curiously. So far Darius had always brushed off Ryou's questions about himself and his country whenever Ryou had had the energy to ask. But something had changed between them last night. There was no constraint in Darius's words now, and he seemed happy to wile away the time with talk and let the horses do the walking.

"Why? What happened?" Ryou prompted.

"The Imperium built roads," Darius said with a sharp gesture towards the one they were riding on. "As well as aqueducts, theaters, schools and baths. I'm not stupid enough to deny the Romans did a lot of good things throughout the Imperium and beyond, but the roads were the real problem. Defying the order of nature and the Paths of Zaratusra, say priests and passers alike. And they're probably right, but that doesn't concern me half as much as troop movement over thousands of miles. Smaller nations who didn't belong to anyone would go to bed thinking 'wouldn't it be nice to have great stone buildings like those Imperial provinces', and then they'd wake up next morning with a thousand legionaries camped by their well. That was just the start. After a couple of generations, those countries were as Roman as the Romans themselves, and then their young men joined the army, formed a locally based Legion that had both a home to defend and the hunger to expand, and suddenly the new neighbors of the Imperium realized that Roma Praetorium wasn't as far away as they thought. Some countries started aping the Romans in the hope that'd make them bigger and smarter and tough enough to resist. Others voluntarily joined the Protectorate rather than become conquests. Nowadays, hell, when you look at it one way, outside of a few barbarian nations and some Empires so far from here I don't know their names, the whole world is Roman..."

"Is that what happened to Assyria?"

"In a way." Darius's expression became somber, gaze turned inward. "All this happened over many, many years, more than a man can count. We were so far from Praetorium, we didn't think it mattered. And hell, we took a liking to aqueducts and baths and whatever else I mentioned. Some people worried, but you see, Roma Praetorium is a weird place. It's like a pot constantly on the boil. Every twelve score years they have a revolution that slaughters half the population until the three rivers run red with blood. Then half their provinces revolt. It's easy to get complacent about a place like that. What some wiser people noticed, particularly those smart Ionians in the Free Cities, was that every revolution ended with a new Emperor, usually some fast-rising general or consul, taking over and starting a wave of conquests to get a better grip on his power and find a place far away from the capital to send the more hot-headed of their military. And every single time, the Imperium ended up bigger than before. They tried to warn us, those Ionians...we failed to listen until it was too late.

"Some time ago, before I was born, that fucking animal Appius Nautius Galeo took control, did the usual number on the senate, and since then blood has spread out like a tide over the lands. He's dead now, the Furies can pick their teeth with his bones, but his son, Vibius Galeo Cassianus, calling himself 'Chosen Shield', is just as bad. They were the ones who decided to expand in our direction, and they knew we wouldn't take that without resistance. By now, we'd figured out their game. We Assyrians had our day as conquerors too, I have to say; we're a hell of a lot bigger now than when Zaratusra first led us here. But now we content ourselves with our country and our provinces. Alone, we were vulnerable. So we formed the Alliance with our one-time enemy, Aksum, and the Free Cities and other neighbors. That was too big for even Galeo the Older to break.

"We thought we were safe," Darius said, glaring at his horse's ears. "We weren't. Appius Galeo turned to treachery when might didn't work. Roman gold started flowing into the Alliance, corrupting those whose heads didn't quite fit their shoulders. From one flood year to the next, Assyria was looking at troubles all over the provinces. So was Aksum and our other allies. And that was only the beginning. They...those jackals murdered our king. Seventeen years ago. Already...Sometimes I can barely believe that it's been so long. His son was too young to hold the country through the
troubles we were facing. In the turmoil and the infighting, a Roman-loving piece of shit became the regent and took over our homeland, rot his heart." Darius spat on the side of the road. There was a dangerous, vindictive light in his eyes, abruptly reminding Ryou that all this was not ancient history, however much it might sound like it. Darius had lived through these terrible times and from the sound of it, he remembered them all too well.

"What happened?" he asked, when Darius was silent.

Darius had been deep in thought, not pleasant ones by the look on his face. Ryou's question reminded him he was in the middle of a story. He gestured as if shooing away the flies that were buzzing around the horses and continued, back to his usual casual style.

"The whore-get son of goats is dead now; been so for well over ten years. Still, the harm was done. Assyria became one more country in the string of lands that Roma Praetorium calls their Protectorates. We were too strong to be conquered and dragged into the Imperium, but we're supposed to be one of their faithful allies; send tribute and support troops, build an Imperial road, and allow Legions to use it to march right through our lands. Mind you, we did build the road in the past ten years," Darius added with a smirk. "We found it really useful to send our forces to attack the armies stationed on our soil, as well as quell those Roman-loving rebels who, seeing which way the wind is blowing, are still trying to start a civil war that will tear us apart and give us piece by piece over to the Imperium. It helps that the Imperium has problems of its own these past few years, internal and external. They want to appear strong, they can't afford to admit we're not under their thumb, so they pretend not to notice that we've kicked out anyone who even looks like a Roman, including their troops, their tax collectors and even their bath slaves. On our side, we pretend not to notice that there are a hell of a lot of Legions in the neighboring pro-Roman kingdoms, and that their advisors are training local troops to resist us. So to end my tale by answering your question, no, we're not at war with the Imperium Romanum. Both sides pretend we're still old friends and allies, sending each other flowery words and pretty gifts with each lying sack-of-shit emissary going back and forth while we attack each other's allies."

"I see."

"You do?" Darius asked dryly. "That's right, you're a magian, you're used to thinking in spirals."

"My own world has wars by proxy like that."

Darius rolled his shoulders beneath his armor. "Personally I like it better when it's just the likes of me and Gaius with nothing but steel between us. Though I shouldn't say that lightly, just in case Inder decides to take me up on that some more," he added with the superstitious gesture to deflect bad luck that he'd used several times before. "Legionaries are not to be taken lightly. They're well trained, well disciplined, well armed. I got Gaius because he was alone, bar the riffraff. If he'd just had one other proper foot soldier with him, I'd never have taken them, not without injury." He was speaking with open esteem. Gaius's stock had definitely gone up after the discovery of the stirrups.

"So the Romans are good fighters?" Ryou had sat through several years of history lessons, but it'd been centered on Japan and other Asian countries. It hadn't left an imperishable memory anyway. His adult life had revolved around investment futures rather than details of the past. If only he'd known...

"'Good fighters'?" Darius snorted. "Are you teasing me? There's nothing that'll make a seasoned soldier soil himself like a baby than seeing a cohort advance on his position. They're the most effective fighting force in the Outlands. Or at least they used to be." Darius gave Ryou a particularly evil smile. "At Thessolia, we faced six thousand picked men, and five hundred of these were actual triarii. I'm talking real Imperials here, not just local sheepherders trained by a centurion to hold a pike
over a twelveday. Listen to these words and see them appear before you, Ryou: a line of steel shields half a mile long marching through the clouds of dust in precision formations that could fend off and punch through anything, supported by cavalry, javelin and archery units. A force that can take on an army three times its size. Except the Alliance made some friends and allies these past few years. Even a solid formation can be beat with a few rounds from a cannon."

Ryou turned towards Darius in surprise. The cantankerous animal beneath him chose that moment to pull on the bridle, nearly spilling him for the third time. "Whoa, you stupid-...Did you say cannons?" Ryou finally asked, after getting a renewed grip on the reins.

"Yes. Do you have them in your world?"

"Well...yes. But I'm surprised you do."

"So are the Per Gathas, I bet," Darius said dryly. "They restrict new kinds of goods and weapons even more than troop movements. They want the lands along the Paths to stay where they are, to stay standing still. A lot of countries do just that; change is seen as a sign you've been invaded, that the ways of your fathers weren't good enough and gave way to those of another. Most of us, we just want to stay the same. Hell, even the Imperium wants to stay the same, and not change from being rampant invaders of other countries."

"But you fight with a sword." Ryou pointed out, unable to leave this whole 'cannon' thing to go back to the moral shortfalls of the expansionist Roman Empire.

"Sure do. Kills a man much more reliably, especially if I'm on horseback." Darius gave the horse a pat, a rough clap that Ryou would have sworn would have sent the animal running like a hare. But the horse just snorted and flicked its tail contentedly. "My unit is cavalry, though we do more than that; we've learned to fight the Legions down and dirty and in any way we can. We're fast, we're trained and we're versatile. We can raid supply lines, set fire to camps, attack walls, cut and run and draw enemies into traps, and harass them any way we can. Behind us, the main Alliance forces has Assyrian bowmen, the best of all our Lands, as well as infantry trained by Terentius himself and a unit of cannons under the direction of a Genoese mercenary who knows what he's doing. We have five of them in all; it's difficult to cast the iron pieces properly. Not very big ones, not like they have in the Empire of Sung Ch'ao. A single horse can carry one and three men can set it down and use it. When you get right down to it, those toys kill fewer men than a good volley of arrows, but the noise and the explosion will send a Roman heavy cavalry running for cover, and turn a tortoise formation upside down. The only ones left in the end were the most disciplined, the triarii, but we whittled them down with pikes, trenches, cavalry charges on the side and by keeping the high ground."

Ryou was still trying to get his mind around the concept. 'But you're all stuck in the Iron Age, how can you have cannons?' was not a polite argument to make.

"Why don't the Romans have cannons?"

Darius's smile became positively rabid. "Because they've been the greatest army in the known world for as many years as there are drops in their three rivers, and they don't expect anyone to cut them down to size whatever the weapons. We Assyrians have been doing our best to educate them."

"Yes, and what if they learn?"

Darius looked at him quizzically, which, on reflection, didn't surprise Ryou. Darius wasn't dumb...for a soldier from the dawn of history. Ryou had gathered from the small discussions he and Darius had shared before now, between all the walking and the keeling over with fatigue, that the two of them did not think alike on some topics. Notions that were long established in Ryou's world were
unknown here.

"I mean, what if the Romans decide to use cannons as well?" he elaborated.

"We'll just use bigger and better ones."

"That's great," said Ryou, while thinking that his plans for the future had never included being caught up in an Age of Antiquity arms race.

Chapter End Notes

If there's one thing I hate in ofic and even a lot of published fiction, it's heavy-ass exposition. Hopefully the above didn't feel like that too much. The downside of the bamf type fics is that sooner or later (hopefully later and not in the first bloody chapter) the main character is going to demand that info dump, it'd be irrational not to.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The horses continued to walk at a constant pace that sunk the kilometers behind them (or possibly the Roman miles) with only one small break for the riders to stretch themselves and have a swallow of water mixed with wine. Then Ryou was back in the saddle, once more with Darius's help. It was a relief to be off his feet, though after a few hours Ryou had figured out that riding a horse wasn't that much more comfortable than walking. It just ached in different places.

They reached the way station around three in the afternoon according to Ryou's watch. It was in a dell near a brook and a pocket of trees, a pleasant little spot. Ryou was surprised by how long and narrow the building was. It was only when he got closer that he realized it wasn't intended for humans but for horses; a long line of stables with a paddock behind them. People had to make do with an arbor hung with vines above crudely hewn wooden tables and benches. A mud-and-wattle shack halfway between the arbor and the stables was the only sign of habitation not meant for quadrupeds. The stables were empty, the shack's one window was shuttered, but the place wasn't deserted. A fire was burning in the pit in front of the shack, provisioned from the huge stack of logs kept dry beneath an extension of the roof. The pit was large; the fire and the single pot above it hanging from a swiveling iron pole and crossbeam all looked small by comparison.

Darius dismounted a little way off, eyes darting around the place. There were only four people present; a fat man in front of the shack, sleeping on a blanket; a dirty grey-haired figure huddled deep in the depths of a green cloak, on the bench closest to the fire; and two dark-skinned mustachioed men wrapped in layer after layer of cloth and fur until they were almost conical. They were packing or unpacking some items from a mule near the road. There was a conspicuous absence of armed troops, to Ryou's relief.

"They could still show up," said Darius when Ryou shared that observation. "That's what the stables are for. They're not keeping fresh animals for messengers or troops, which means they don't trust they won't be stolen by thieves, but the place is still open for business. That man" - Darius eyed the presumed cook, who'd woken up when Ryou's gelding whickered and was now sitting up on his blanket and scratching his armpit - "is almost certainly a veteran given this station to hold as a merit. A patrol could stop for provisions at any time, or a courier, or a whole cohort for all I know. Here, sit here, watch our stuff and try not to talk to anyone. If someone does ask, you're the hire of a fur trader from Jiroh and I'm your guard. We're traveling to Aksum to remove your boss's trade counter, because it's getting too dangerous for Imperial citizens to do business there. Did you get all that?"

"Yes."

Ryou obediently sat down on the crude bench while Darius tied their reins around stout poles near the corner of the arbor furthest from the cook. Ryou had noted how Darius had tugged at the sleeves of his tunic, making sure they covered his bracers with their Assyrian symbol. An apt reminder that the two of them were in hostile territory and that others than Gaius might try to supplement their income with bounty hunting.

"Make sure you keep an eye on the horses," Darius cautioned Ryou, before heading towards the shack, hand on the purse he'd lifted from Gex and which he'd filled with tiny coins gathered from the deserters' various belongings.

Three minutes later, he was back with a shallow bowl of some nameless stew, a chunk of flat
unleavened bread and a pitcher. Ryou realized he was still hungry, even though they'd eaten only a few hours ago.

"Eat up," Darius advised him. "I'm going back to bargain for some better tack, and also get some information. I got you beer," Darius added when he caught Ryou's glance at the pitcher. "You didn't seem to like the wine this morning. Though the hosteller does have some, if that's more to your liking."

Ryou preferred sake or cognac, but he didn't mind beer. He didn't mind wine either. But Darius had mentioned at some point in the past few days that Assyrian wine, for one, was made from grapes, fermented a short time and then 'ended' with a good shot of palm-tree liquor. The horse was adventure enough for one day, Ryou decided, thanking Darius for the beer.

Darius made his way back to the firepit. Ryou looked around for any sign of cutlery and found none. They'd eaten the rabbit earlier using plundered knives and pieces of biscuit. Darius had known what a fork was when Ryou had mentioned it, but didn't see how it would be any more practical than what they had, while a description of chopsticks had left him bemused. Ryou was willing to adapt as much as he could to his given situation, but if there was a way of eating stew with a knife, it'd take a wiser 'magian' than him to find it. Presumably he would not look out of place if he pretended this was a ramen stand on the way home from the office instead of some antique picnic site from the back-end of history. He prosaically tipped up the bowl, took a sip- and winced as the heat touched off nerves in the tooth Gaius's first punch had loosened yesterday.

Ryou put the bowl down to cool, and ran his tongue over the sore part of his mouth, and then the rest of his teeth. He could swear they were getting fuzzy. Five days without brushing. A week ago, Ryou would not have believed a neat freak like him would survive that. Five days without soap, a proper shower, and shaving. Stubble was cropping up on Ryou's face, not even regularly but in rough patches on either side of his chin and over his mouth. Another couple of weeks and he was going to look like he was auditioning for a remake of one of Mifune's scruffier bandit roles.

...Of course it wasn't that, or the odd taste of the food, or his inability to indulge his compulsive email checking habit, that was the most disturbing. Yesterday he'd stumbled upon the site of a massacre. Last night, five strangers had hurt him and planned to sell him as bounty. Then Darius had killed them. Ryou still felt prickles of shock and disbelief when his mind tripped over those facts, but it seemed counterproductive to think about it too much. This world's values were so very different from his, it skewed his perspective, as did Darius's sanguine view that they'd simply rid themselves of a threat and secured needed supplies, rather than committed multiple homicides. The cold logic of the situation dictated that Ryou adapt and imitate him. He had to concentrate on the here and now, and be ready for the next crisis. When he got back to civilization, that would be the time to reassert his moral compass, reflect on what had happened and sort it all out. Maybe Yuki could refer him to a good psychiatrist at that point in time, because Ryou was probably going to need one, what with-

"Ehe."

Ryou blinked and looked up in the direction of that sound which had been either a fake laugh or an interjection of some sort.

The dirty man wrapped in the huge green cloak was standing at the other end of the bench, a staff as high as his stooped shoulders held in both hands. He was bowing up and down in a way that looked subservient, though Ryou's finetuned senses for greetings, an essential requirement for salarymen, told him the man wasn't so much respectful as desirous of something.

"Ehe, ehe, greetings, my hand beneath your foot," he said, which Ryou could not make sense of. "Where are you going, sir?"
Ryou's mouth went dry with alarm...but then he noticed how the stranger's gaze darted towards the pitcher on the table between each bow. He re-evaluated the thick, reddened features, the way the eyes were swimming in their sockets, the sour smell.

"I hail from Tortora, I can tell you about the road up ahead," said the man, eyes getting more and more stuck on the beer. "I talk to everyone, I talk to everyone, and all travelers talk to this rhapsode. I know all about the roads, I do. Where are you going? The roads are not safe these days, it's good to know what's ahead. Good to know."

Indubitably. Ryou glanced over to the 'kitchen', but Darius was still deep in conversation with the cook, a mug of some beverage in one hand and a chunk of bread in the other.

When Ryou looked back, the man had cringed. "No, no. No, no, I'm not being a bother," he said, backing away. "No need to call your man, no need."

After five days in Darius's company, Ryou had quite forgotten how intimidating his friend could look from a certain perspective, particularly now that he was out of the grey jogging top and clothed like some sword-bearing mercenary.

"It's okay, I'm not bothered. Do you want some beer?" Ryou asked, making up his mind.

The wino's eyes flitted from Darius, to Ryou and then to the pitcher. Ryou pushed it towards him invitingly. There were no cups, it was possible the whole thing had been meant for Ryou in the first place, but he'd had a whiff of the pungent stuff when Darius set it down and he was glad to let the drunkard have it.

"I'm going to Aksum," said Ryou. "What are the roads like?" Darius would decide if the information garnered was reliable or not.

The rhapsode - Ryou presumed that's what he was - had seated himself on the far end of the bench, the pitcher already in his hand. Half of it went down his throat in quick gulps before he looked up at Ryou. "Aksum? Oh, oh, not so good, not so good. Ehe. War, war everywhere. The surrounding countries have been ravaged. The eastern provinces of Aksum rose up against King Ka when they thought the Imperium's shadow would protect them; he has put them down in a rain of blood and fire. To the other side of their border, Assyria is moving too. People talk of reprisals against the countries who let the Roman wolf pass through to prey on Assyria's flock. Prey," he repeated, as if particularly content with his choice of words.

Ryou's ears pricked, though he went on sipping the stew as if he wasn't any more interested than that.

"Right now, the Gods of war have descended upon Essin. King Ka has overlooked the mutinous tendencies of his southernmost province for years. Some say he could not bear to bring his banners to the city where he'd been fostered in his childhood. But the Assyrians and their allies have no such compunction, and have entered into Aksum to hound their Imperial enemies. They met in two successive battles, and the forces of Essin were defeated by their numbers. But the Allies did not capture the lord of Essin, he escaped the field with his personal guard. Now the capital of the province is besieged by Alliance forces. I heard this was so just a twelveday ago."

He made it sound like it was hot off the press. "The forces are led by Terentius the Traitor, Meromeidon of Bactria and Ghan the Beast. Essin is waiting for Imperial reinforcements, but I've heard of none. Men say that one way or another, that's the end of the Protectorate. The Bitch King himself said-...I- I mean," the rhapsode said in a strangled voice, "King Leyam. King Leyam, I mean."

He was staring up at Darius who'd approached the table at some point and was listening, hands on
his hips and an unreadable expression on his face.

"Yes, I'm sure that's what you meant," said Darius. "Do you know if Essin is still under siege? What's the last you heard?"

The man licked his lips. He had shrunk into his seat until his green wrap seemed even bigger than before. "Um, I haven't heard of its fall. I was talking to Samarian traders three days ago and they'd not heard anything from Aksum's capital. If Essin had fallen, surely...surely the wreaths of victory, ehe, of victory, would have been hung at the gates..."

"I see. Who did you say was at Essin?"

The bard seemed a little reassured, straightening moderately so that his dirty neck emerged from the huddle of cloak, like a turtle poking prudently out of its shell. "Terentius-...um-"

"Terentius the Traitor, yes, I heard that bit, though most people outside the Imperium refer to him as General Quintus Terentius Varro, the liberator of the Free Cities."

"That's right, that's right, the great battle of-"

"Skip it," said Darius. Then he relented, fished a small brown coin out of his purse and tossed it at the man, who made it disappear even faster than the beer. "Who else is at Essin?"

"Um, Lucius Minius Costa of the province of Gette brought a thousand men out in support of General Terentius; a thousand men. Terentius himself leads as many free men and Assyrian infantry. Meromeidon, the one they call the Lion's Head, yes, has rallied five hundred Bactrian skirmishers-" Darius nodded imperceptibly "-and the Free City of Belocia sent men and engineers. Ghan the- Lord Ghan is there as well with two hundred heads of Assyrian cavalry. It is said he has threatened to lay waste to Essin, submit every man, woman and child to the edge of the sword and sow the ground with salt if the city did not surrender."

Darius rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that's what they always say. I doubt anyone's ever gone through with it; it'd be a bloody waste of salt, not to mention tribute. Even Plutius never actually did that, and that was one Roman who was used to handing out some pretty serious threats and carrying through with them too."

"Yes, that is the truth." The rhapsode had relaxed more and more, his unshaven grey jowls quivering as he nodded enthusiastically. "General Plutius, the one they called Cursed, lay waste the province of Shormo Eil until the ground could no longer grow barley, but only weep tears of blood."

Ryou blinked and rubbed his ear. The rhapsode's voice had become deeper, more rhythmic...and Ryou was hearing an odd sort of echo. It was like listening to a radio with some feedback from another channel. He could hear clearly the descriptions of the atrocities perpetrated by one General Quintus Plutius Denter, Fourth Legion, but he could also hear the rhapsode talking in a foreign language, more guttural than Japanese, with regular sentences of similar length and beat, a song being spoken. It wasn't a pleasant sensation, and it reminded Ryou that he knew next to nothing about this gift of Zaratusra that was supposedly breaking the Curse of Babel and allowing him to communicate.

"For an entire day did the arrows fall like rain from the sky, until one could no longer walk across the fields of Nykome." The rhapsode was still spinning his tale, without any of those previous repetitions that had peppered his speech like a verbal nervous tic. Behind him, the two mustachioed men had left their pack mule and were listening with rapt interest. "And at the end of the day did Lord Ghan take the field with fleet cavalry to circle the reduced forces of Plutius. They went through
the manipules like a well-whetted scythe through the stalks of wheat, until the Assyrian Hounds reached the Roman Eagle. Plutius, to whom his Emperor had given the golden arrows of bravery, drew his sword, but his horse was killed beneath him by the throw of a spear and he was felled to the ground. No honor, no, no honor at all in the death of the man who had killed the fruitful province of Shormo Eil; for Lord Ghan had him torn apart by a pack of dogs-

"Yeah, the Assyrians sure didn't have cause to like Plutius," interrupted Darius, who'd been glancing at the angle of the sun in the sky several times during the tale. "And they don't call Ghan 'the Beast' for nothing."

"Wise are your words concerning the man they call the Killer of Alespis," said the rhapsode, changing tales with barely a blink of an eye. "One thousand men cut down where they stood, even though they were not the ones who had sacked the great temple of Gushkin-Banda. No matter! No matter! Death does not judge, and death it was that came for them by the banks of that cursed river Alepsis. "I offer no surrender," cried Prince Travenius. "I take none," answered Lord Ghan, and then the heavens split open at his command and rained fire on-

"I happened to be there actually, and it wasn't-" Darius started to say, then changed his mind. "So Ghan himself is at Essin, is he?"

The rhapsode looked ready to continue his tale regardless, but then he must have remembered who was paying. "Yes, generous patron," he answered in a normal voice.

"I don't give Essin very long, then, do I," said Darius with a wolfish grin.

The rhapsode laughed, a slightly forced sound which became more sincere when he caught another coin Darius tossed his way. The mule-herders also chortled in appreciation. When Ryou and Darius left a few minutes later, they were listening to the full tale of Alepsis which the rhapsode was spinning for them, still clutching his now empty pitcher of beer.

"We can make the border if we ride till evening," Darius said once they were well clear of the way station. "We'll rest there. I don't want to miss the dawn Path, if there is one. We need to get back, I need to talk to- to some people and find out what the hell is going on."

"We really are going to Aksum, aren't we," Ryou guessed.

Darius hesitated, looking down at his pommel, then he grimaced. "Yeah. Assyria would be safer; I'd rather not ride through a warzone with just the two of us, but I really do need to get back to my post."

"You said you needed to talk to Terentius, on our first night in the Broken Lands."

Darius gave him a surprised look. "You and your memory. Yeah, I do. Terentius Varro is one of the many Romans who went native in the Free Cities, years ago. He's been the leader of the Alliance forces for the last eight years. I've got some information he needs to know. Besides, I want to be there when Essin falls. I owe it to a lot of people, starting with my king."

"King Leyam, right?" said Ryou, thinking about the term 'Bitch King' he'd heard twice now.

"King Leyam Sirrianus, yes- Sirrian. Sirrian," repeated Darius with an air of self-directed annoyance. "Sirrianus is the Roman form," he explained when he caught Ryou's questioning look. "With half the
world being Roman for twelvescore years or more, anyone who traveled could speak a little Latin and introduce themselves the Roman way. Our forefathers didn't question it; it didn't seem harmful, and it made it easier to talk in other countries. Avestan, the language of the blessed one who led us all to the Outlands, is a bit, um, cumbersome when you're trying to talk about new ideas. Zaratusra forgive me, but it’s true,” Darius added in a defensive mutter directed at the sky above as if a venerable ancient prophet was scowling disapprovingly down from one of the grey clouds hanging there.

"But we're trying to rid ourselves of that way of thinking now. I'm damned if we're going to beat those bloody Romans on the battlefield and then take them home with us, like we did with the Persians and the Ionians. We conquered the Empires of Persia and Babylon thousands of years ago and they became our own people as a result. My name is Persian, in case you didn't know. It’s a very common name in Assyria. Half the gods in our pantheon are Persian. Same with the Ionians and their writings and phalanx deployments. But the Romans are different. And when this war’s over, I hope we can bloody well be Assyrian again," Darius finished in a grumble.

Sure, the Romans are different, especially while you're at war with them, but when you do get rid of them you'll probably keep the theaters and baths and aqueducts, as well as the convenience of being able to easily talk to other countries with a mix of Avestan and Latin, thought Ryou, though he wisely didn't say anything.

"Anyway, that's why it's no longer Leyam Sirrianus, the name those jackal-tongued courtiers who tried to turn him into some Roman gave him, but Sirrian, the name the kings of his line have worn for centuries, directly descended from Paxalmetes-Sirrian the Great. And that’s the name that’ll be imprinted into Emperor Galeo's arse when we kick him out from the Protectorates."

Ryou digested that for awhile, before concluding, "So is your real name Poleni?"

Darius gave him a puzzled look. "What?"

"You told me your name was Darius Bher Polenius."

"...Man, you really do have a good memory. No, my last name is Polenius. My mother was Roman. The Bher in my name means child of my mother. Par would mean child of my father, followed by his name. Assyrian girls are traditionally named Bher, and there's a few instances where a man married up and his sons are better off wearing their mother's name. But in most cases, a man with a Bher in his name is a bastard like me," said Darius with a wolfish grin, eyes on Ryou's face.

If he expected some kind of reaction, he was yet again disappointed. Ryou was certainly startled, but he was much too controlled to show it. It would be the height of incivility for anyone in Japan to react to that particular statement anyway. "I see," was all he said.

"You're no fun to tease."

"Oh, you were joking."

"Hell no," said Darius with the same expression. "I'm illegitimate, that's for sure. My mother was some tart who got sold out when her family lost its holdings to debt in conquered territory at the edges of the Imperium. She was lucky enough to be extremely pretty, which meant she got sold to a Tribune and moved to one of the Protectorates next to Assyria. When his outpost fell to Alliance forces, she was part of the conqueror's booty, and she caught the eye of my father. He was never one to take women as prizes during a campaign, he always said he had enough trouble with the ones at home, but he told me many times that you'd have to be Tiresias to not put a woman like that in your bed. She lived in luxury for a couple of years, which was more than most women in her position can
say. But she died in childbed with me, so the only thing I’ve ever known of her is the cognomen we share."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?" Darius looked honestly puzzled. "It happens. Women die in childbirth all the time, despite the intervention of Hygiea. Besides, if she'd lived, my father would have made arrangements for us both, and he wouldn't have-"

Darius interrupted himself as if he'd said more than he'd intended. His frown suggested an internal argument, maybe over the way of getting out of this conversation without insult. Ryou felt a prickle of regret as he watched the détente between them hit a snag.

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to," Ryou said, which was perfectly true and should have immediately banished his feelings of disappointment. Oddly enough, it didn't.

Darius was silent for a minute and then carried on as if Ryou hadn't said a word. "He couldn't give me his name or acknowledge me because of circumstances. But since I was alone, he raised me anyway, and he treated me and his legitimate children with no distinction whatsoever. He was a great man. And a great father." Darius's smile was one Ryou hadn't seen before, both amused and begrudgingly affectionate. Ryou had the sudden intuition that even if he was only hearing one side of the story, this was a side Darius had not told many people before him..."Inder, did he raise me hard at times, but I acted like the little deva of Ur when I was young. He probably should have taken a stick to me more often. Always did it himself, too, instead of asking a tutor or a slave. Said that was a father's duty, and no other man was going to lay hands on one of his boys."

Deep, deep inside, Ryou felt a tiny flinch around a shard of memory lodged there back when he was thirteen, the first and last time the president had ever come close to striking him, except he hadn't, which had made it worse. Ryou shook his head, irritated at himself, and spoke louder than he usually did to be heard over the clop of hooves and the unnecessary reminder of angry words. "So where is your father now? He'll be worried about you. You disappeared without a trace a few weeks ago; he doesn't know where you are."

Darius looked surprised. "What? He died years ago, when I was a whelp of eight. Didn't I mention that?"

"Oh, sorry," Ryou said once more. Darius hadn't mentioned that, but there had been something in his tone that'd half implied it, and Ryou now wasn't sure where his own question had come from or who it had really been about...

Darius shrugged off Ryou's apology. "I wish he was still here, to see me come back with a Roman shield to honor him, but that's not what the Gods put in their tablets, so there it is. But maybe you'll meet my brother when we get back," he added and burst into raucous laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"No, no, nothing. My brother is twice as tough as I am and considerably meaner. I hope I get the chance to see you two meet; I bet he'll like you. Come on, I want to get home." Still laughing, he kicked his horse into a trot. Ryou's beast immediately matched pace, and Ryou was left to concentrate on not falling off, which was a good distraction from wondering what a man twice as tough as Darius and considerably meaner would be like.

Chapter End Notes
We do eventually get to meet this brother. Darius's description of him is apt. No spoilers in the comments please, in case there are new readers around who don't know some of the twists coming ahead ;)

Extra note on Roman names: before I get corrected by fans of ancient Rome, yes, I know it should be Q. Varro or Q. Terentius or some other form depending on who is talking about him, in what context, etc. And later, he should be addressed directly as 'Terenti', rather than Terentius. I think. I boned up on this a bit when choosing his name, and I had to recently plunge into it again to write one of my current WIP chapters. HOWEVER, keep in mind that poor Terentius has voluntarily exiled himself for nigh on two decades in the 'barbarian' lands of the Pariya region, where people are used to addressing each other by their first name (eg Darius) or their two last names, (eg 'Behr Polenius') for more formality. Imperial lackeys would get it right, but the free city populations would - almost kinda on purpose as not wanting to adopt Roman nomenclature - mix up poor Varro's name until he gave up and let everyone call him General Terentius Varro, liberator of the Free Cities. After a decade, he even found he liked it. (This note brought to you by a writer who thinks waaaaay too much about background characters who barely appear at all in their fic)
Chapter 12

The road through the moorlands went on and on. Ryou was nodding on his horse and at real risk of falling both asleep and off the animal altogether. They hadn't seen a tree since the way station four hours ago. The sun was setting on the horizon, sending shadows to wash around the far side of the highland's hillocks like an ever-frozen sea full of billows.

The stone marker on the side of a road was sheer relief, not least because its upright angles were a welcome break in all these soft, flowing lines.

"Finally," Darius muttered, touching his heels to the flanks of his horse to spur it on.

Whatever he read on the milestone made him smile when Ryou and his dispirited horse had caught up. "Hang in there, my friend. We're nearly at the border. Another five minutes and we'll be at the Paths of Everywhere."

With such a grandiose name, the primitive stone-and-wattle building was a letdown. Crushed by the vastness of the moors, it skulked at the center of a circle delimited by shoulder-high stones.

"At least this region hasn't so far gone to the dogs that they pulled their passer out," Darius muttered mostly to himself, leading their horses around the large circle. "Oh, Ryou, be careful not to go between the stelae."

"Why?" asked Ryou, not that he had an option when his horse was sticking close to Darius's anyway. He looked curiously at the stones. They were large chunks of grey granite without carvings or anything other than moss and weather damage. They didn't seem particularly interesting.

"You might get lost. If it's you, you'll definitely get lost. This is where the Paths start. You- oh, there's someone. Look, Ryou, don't say anything odd and whatever you do, don't do anything. No magic, I mean." Darius spoke in a muted hiss, craning back on his horse. Then he turned and waved in the direction of the building. "Greetings! Can we come in?"

An old man was sitting on a bench near the entrance thirty meters away, smoking a crude pipe and plucking the feathers from a chicken. "Sure thing," was the prosaic answer that drifted through the evening air. "Go down two stones. Welcome in the name of the Traveler."

"The Path he walked is three times praised," answered Darius in the same formulaic way. He nudged the horse onwards. Ryou bit back a groan as his own horse took a larger step, jolting his aching body.

They dismounted near the indicated stone, which had nothing particular about is as far as Ryou could see. Darius led his horse forward a step on a short rein, then he turned as if on an afterthought and ducked under the head of the animal to stand on its other side, near Ryou, who was scrabbling off his mount as best he could.

"We're coming in," said Darius, stepping into the circle.

Ryou clicked his tongue dubiously, the way he'd heard Darius do. The horse gave him what Ryou thought was a disparaging look, but followed him as he stepped past the marker.

Then he yelped as the ground disappeared beneath him.

He staggered and clung to the reins. His horse snorted and immediately lowered its head, dumping
Ryou into the dirt. Then it jerked its head up again. Ryou had wrapped the reins around his hand the way Darius had. He found himself being pulled sideways half a step as the animal yanked at his arm again. Ryou decided off the top of his head that he didn't particularly like horses, or any vehicle that had a mind of its own.

"Ryou?!" Darius was there, gripping his arm hard enough to hurt, every line in his body tense.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Ryou said, scrambling to sit up. "I just tripped."

"On what?" Darius asked pointedly, raking his gaze across the ground behind them which was made up of ancient sod so flattened by countless hooves that it could have been used as a bowling lane.

"I-...my legs must be tired." Ryou gave the ground an incredulous look as he let Darius help him to his feet. It had felt like he'd missed a step, a large one, but he couldn't have. Deep inside, Ryou had the oddest feeling that he was still moving somehow. But every other sense he possessed told him this was nonsense.

"Ai, what's wrong with him?" came the creaky voice from the porch.

"Nothing, he's fine," Darius replied.

"He's not sick, is he? Hell and damnation, what's wrong with his face? He's not got the steppes fevers, does he?!"

"No, of course not. We ran into some bandits, he got beat up. It was yesterday, so he's still woozy."

"Oh, okay. Bring him in, then. Hurry up, young man; the waters of the river are getting choppy, what with evening falling."

A river...? Ryou stopped dusting himself off to give the circle of stones another look. There was a tiny little rill winding its way through the area, on the other side of the house. Ryou could have crossed it in three steps. He did not see how it could get choppy and why this would be a cause for concern...

He was brought back to more immediate concerns when Darius's grip transferred from his elbow to his hand. "I'm fine, really," he said, but Darius did not let go as he lead Ryou and the horses forward. The gelding and the baggage animal fell into step behind him, Ryou's horse followed suit without much self-contemplation by the looks of it, almost knocking Ryou over as it brushed past him. Their shadows, elongated by the setting sun, had already reached the walls of mud and wattle.

The ground rose imperceptibly to a flattened area where the building squatted. By the time they reached it, the odd feeling that'd tripped Ryou up had definitely left him.

"Stable's that way," said the antique on the bench, hands still busy sending up small geysers of feathers.

"Thanks. Is your man the passer?" asked Darius, the first indication Ryou had that the elderly cook was a woman. She was so withered and stooped he'd not been able to tell. Her thinning white hair was cropped short, and she was wearing trousers knotted by strips of cloth at ankle and knee under a butcher's apron.

"No, boy," she answered without looking up, "I'm the passer."

"Oh," said Darius, apparently reorganizing his thoughts. "When can we take a route to Aksum?"
"Hoy, I can get you on your way as soon as I finish with this chicken."

There was a heartbeat of a pause, and then Darius said, "Without going through any part of the Imperium."

"That's where they say all the roads lead to, my boys. And Aksum is one long path to travel if you don't want to go through any Imperial province or protectorate. I can only get you part of the way, and you're lucky I've been walking this Path for as long as I have or I wouldn't have a clue how to get you there. But I know the ins and outs of all these countries, I've been trudging through them long enough. Tomorrow morning at dawn, a road will open to Palis. From there on, you can travel south on horseback or with a convoy to the border in the province of Kazanstar. I happen to know there's an infrequent Path to Aksum that starts there at times. It won't take you to the capital, though, but to some southern province or other, and if you're lucky, you won't have to wait a month for the Path to open. Now, if you're not in any hurry..." She had eyes like hard, brown walnuts beneath bushy white brows, fixed inquisitively on Darius's face even as the feathers flew.

Darius frowned, but all he said was, "We'll do that. Can you put us up in your inn for the night? My friend and I could use a safe bed to sleep in."

"Yeah, I can see that," she cackled with a glance at Ryou's face. "I got a bed for you, if you have a brass sestertius. I'll throw in some food for a couple of dupondii, and a silver a man for the passer, of course."

"Of course," said Darius. After some haggling, he handed over a number of coins and then pulled the horses towards the stables.

The stable was not too far off from the outhouse, and Ryou could have found them both with his eyes blindfolded, by smell alone. It made him wonder what the inn was going to be like. He still felt itchy every time he thought of the state of the packs they'd ransacked this morning, an irrational and annoying failure of his usually disciplined mind (or at least he hoped it was irrational).

"You okay?"

Ryou stopped scratching at the skin beneath his collar. "I'm fine, just an itch. Sweat, probably."

Darius gave him a heavy look. "I was talking about your stumble earlier."

"Oh. I don't know what that was, I just felt dizzy."

"Hmph. Just don't do anything. Not here."

"I know."

"Here, help me take care of the horses."

Horses required considerably more maintenance than cars, and these creatures had been somewhat neglected according to Darius. Ryou learned to loosen their gear and walk them to cool them down, then groom, water and feed them, something else he'd never been taught in university. The manual labor chased away the memory of that inexplicable feeling he'd had when stepping through the stone circle.

With a diffuse sense of satisfaction he'd never felt when stopping at a gas station, Ryou watched his cleaned horse plunge its nose into the hayrack. They'd been at the border for just about an hour, and the evening had almost entirely given way to the night. Ryou stretched, trying to work out the kinks from riding, and looked around. The moors and the circle of stone had all gone grey in the twilight.
The tiny stream winding its way between two stones and across the clearing must provide the inn with fresh water. At the back of the inn, chickens perched in boxes around a dozing goat, half sheltered by a crude lean-to barn Ryou would have to stoop to enter. Other than that, Ryou did not see how this place was provisioned. It was hard to believe this was one of the famous borders Darius had told him about, the Paths that punctured the layers of the onion to link one distant country to the next.

"What if you ignored the border and just went on riding?" Ryou had asked a couple of days earlier, when Darius had first explained all this. "Wouldn't you get to somewhere else eventually?"

"Oh sure, you'd get to the next country after a few days or weeks. It's hard traveling, though; people settle near cities, rivers and borders, where the commerce is. The land between countries is empty, you can't get provisions. It's also dry, or mountainous, or marshy and nigh-on impassable without a road."

"How long would it take you to get home that way?"

Darius had snorted. "Who knows, not many people travel that way for any distance; months, maybe. And I'm damned if I'd know which direction to go. I'll use the Paths, if that's okay with you. The only ones who march through the countryside are smugglers, bandits and invading armies."

Seeing this tiny inn, the elderly passer and this circle of stones, Ryou now understood why an entire army could not march through here. More importantly, the Per Gathas would not allow this, and with good reason; if their Paths could be the route to an invasion, it would make their borders and their passers strategic targets for defense.

"All done?" Darius asked, coming up behind him. He'd taken care of two of the horses for Ryou's one, and had finished ahead of him. He had a pack in his hands, a selection of items from the saddlebags.

"Yes. I was thinking, the Per Gathas must hold considerable amount of power in your Outlands."

Darius stopped settling a blanket over his shoulder to give Ryou the look of one who'd had to abruptly change mental gears. "Uh, yeah, they do. But they stay mostly out of our affairs. Oh, they keep a heavy hand on what gets traded along the Paths, but they stay neutral in our wars, and nobody tries to drag them in." Darius looked like he was about to add something, but then he glanced over his shoulder at the inn. "Come on, let's go see if that passer managed to make some halfway decent food out of that old egg-layer."

"Don't blame me if dinner's late, I keep getting interrupted," the passer informed them tartly as she stirred a pot bubbling over the fire. Apparently this was going to be old egg-layer stew night. A few amorphous blobs of what were presumably vegetables floated to the surface as she jerked the ladle around. Dried, withered roots and other legumes hung in bunches from the low rafters, forcing Ryou and Darius to duck frequently. A large ham joint and another dead chicken were suspended from hooks near the far door, with a few flies paying worship.

"There's a lot of people traveling from here?" Darius asked, tone casual but eyes fixed on the passer's back.

"As thickly as locusts, boys. There's rumor that the Eighteenth Legion is pulling out of Tortora; Imperial citizens and people who can afford to are leaving this province and heading to Roma Praetorium, or to Assyria or the Maurya Empire or even further beyond if that's where they think
they'll be safest. Hell, last week I even had a couple of scribes who were going all the way to the Empire of Sung; may Zaratusra bless their shoes because they'll be traveling quite awhile."

"But there's nobody here now," Darius pointed out, eyes traveling over the interior of the inn once again. He'd been scrutinizing shadows from the moment they'd entered.

"No, they all move on in a day or so. I'm the only passer, and there aren't that many Paths going through here. I drop them off at one of the larger circles where they travel on from there. Of course, board and bread cost more there, and they might not get away any sooner; the Praised One didn't make tracks through the Veil for anyone's convenience, the Paths are what they are. But they preferred to wait elsewhere, it seems."

When Ryou eventually had the chance to sit at the rustic table and taste elderly chicken stew, he had to concede those other travelers had a point.

After supper, the old woman grabbed a pail of slops and headed out to the barn. Ryou was astoundingly tired considering he'd let the horse do the walking today. He must be used to going to bed with the chickens now. He let Darius lead him to a corner of the inn, and watched his companion put blankets down on a straw mattress before he reacted.

"We're sharing the same bed?"

Darius looked up in surprise. "Of course."

It'd been no question when they were camping rough. Now, however...It would have been less of a problem if Ryou did not have good cause to know that Darius slept naked if it wasn't too cold. From the way he was stripping off his belt and shirt now, the inn was quite warm enough.

"It's a sestertius a bed," Darius said dryly, interpreting Ryou's silence. "That means we're sharing, though I'm sure there's room in the stables if you prefer. I'll not join you; a passer's house is sacrosanct, which means this is the last good night's sleep we'll get for the next twelveday. But don't be bothered on my behalf. Maybe you and your horse will get along better if you spend the night together."

"I'll pass," said Ryou, loosening the strap over his forearm to remove the knife.

"Everything as you wish it, my fine young sirs?" asked the passer as she walked in, dumping the pail down near the door.

"Yes, we're fine," said Ryou automatically.

"Good, then I'm turning in. I'll wake you boys up before dawn." She walked over to the fire, took a sip from a beer mug that'd been left on the lintel, smacked her toothless gums in appreciation and then arthritically struggled out of her shirt.

Ryou had been taking off his shoes at that point and happened to glance up and then away very quickly, but not fast enough to have missed seeing a gnarled torso. There were more rustling noises. Ryou couldn't guess if she was taking off the breeches or not, and didn't want to know. When he heard her mutter, he glanced up almost reluctantly, to see her slip into a bundle of blankets on a pallet a couple of meters away from the fire. She muttered to herself for another minute, was silent a minute more (Ryou took off his shoes as quietly as possible) then started to snore.

"Ryou, you heard the woman, we're getting up early. Come to bed." Darius was already under the blankets, his eyes closed.
Ryou slipped in beside him. His discomfort was nothing more than a reflex by now; he knew he was in a different world with different values. He was going to save up all his shock for the way those thugs last night were going to torture and possibly kill him out of hand.

Darius shifted in bed and turned around. Ryou opened his eyes to see what his friend was doing and started as he realized Darius was leaning over him.

The fire in the hearth was the only light left. The innkeeper had removed the smelly bowl of tallow that had illuminated their late-night supper. In the uncertain light, Darius's face was cast in tones of bronze and shadows, his eyes picked out by glints of gold. His face was so close to Ryou's now that the latter had instinctively hitched up onto his elbows that he could feel the fall of Darius's hair against his cheek.

"I forgot to tell you, stick close to me when we pass the river tomorrow. Follow in my footsteps as much as you can, and don't do anything that will send us to the Void and back."

Ryou focused on the words and nodded.

"Don't ask any questions she might find suspicious. Passers are charged with keeping an eye out on the movement of people and merchandise. And I think she's naturally curious anyway." The old woman had peppered them with questions over dinner, which Darius had mostly fended off. "If she gets any idea you're from Inland...that will make things complicated."

"Okay."

Darius patted Ryou on the bare skin of his shoulder. "Just stay close to me and you'll be fine. It's not that big a deal, I've passed dozens of borders in my lifetime."

Ryou nodded again, trying to hide the fact that the skin-to-skin contact had been unexpected and a little troubling.

There was a breath of silence. A log in the fireplace crackled and sparked.

In the firelight, Darius's mouth quirked. "We'll be riding hard the next twelveday, camping out rough if we have to. I've got to get to Essin as quickly as I can."

"Yes, you said that."

"Outside of a passer's house, there's no guarantees. We'll be sleeping in turns until we get where we're going, particularly through Kazanstar. War's ploughed that field until it's only pebbles, it's not safe."

"If that's what you think is best."

"...Our last full night in a safe bed, with a warm body for company. Such a pity to waste it entirely on sleep."

Ryou shook his head minimally. "Darius, this habit of yours, of trying to get under my skin, is a little annoying."

The lips quirked even more. "Oh? What if I'm serious?"

Ryou gave the passer near the hearth a pointed look.

Darius followed Ryou's gaze, puzzled. "What?"
"She might wake up," said Ryou and then bit his tongue. That almost made it sound like he wouldn't object to-

"What if she does?" Darius sounded honestly mystified.

...Apparently nakedness was not the only social stigma these ancient countries had not bothered with.

Ryou's heart went into overdrive when Darius's hand beneath the blanket settled on his thigh.

"These would be more of a problem," said Darius, referring to the pants that Ryou had decisively worn to bed.

The moment tipped in balance, still mostly a joke but suddenly Ryou wasn't sure that was the only thing it was. The way his body was tingling, he also wasn't sure he'd be able or even willing to stop this, even if there was a woman who could be his grandmother snoring by the fire.

Darius's hand left Ryou's thigh, ghosted up, tipped his face to one side so the left was turned towards the firelight. "Your bruises are doing better. You heal fast; the sign of a strong life force." The finger lingered, tapped Ryou's lips lightly a couple of times...a gesture that was nowhere near a joke and more a self-directed admonition, a reminder of what could not be. Then Darius turned away, the blanket moving about them as he settled back down. "Go to sleep," he muttered.

Darius's breathing eventually softened and deepened; a rhythm Ryou was already familiar with. The passer snorted and snored in the background. Ryou stared at the rafters until they disappeared with the death of the fire.

He's a friend- no, not even a friend, we just got thrown together by the most random and strangest circumstances imaginable, Ryou reasoned. I like to approach people who are similar to myself; he's so different he's from another epoch. He kills for a living, he's got very dangerous people after him, and he's involved in some sort of plot. He also doesn't trust me enough to give me any facts about it despite my life being on the line too, or tell me anything more concrete about himself other than his name and a few other minor details. If he manages to get me back home, something he hasn't even promised to do, then I'll never see him again, and considering everything I've gone through since I met him, that can only be for the best. So what the hell-

...what the hell am I feeling regret over...?
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I might be posting only 1 chapter a week for awhile, while I get The Arrangement out and start on Source of All Things. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go spin a dozen plates in the air :D

A series of bumps and thuds woke Ryou up. He sat up in bed, heart beating.

"Ah, he's awake," said the passer, the door swinging shut on its leather strips behind her. She was carrying a small copper pail. On the other side of the room, Darius dusted off his hands as he stood up from a pile of logs he'd dropped into a wooden bin near the fire.

The passer grinned toothlessly at Ryou. "Get up, young man, get up if you want to break your fast. Then we'll be going. How about you, my handsome? Want some milk?"

"Yes, thanks, and if you can sell us some of your cured ham too, I'd take it as a favor," Darius answered, putting a couple of logs and a few branches in the fire and building it up from the embers. From what Ryou could see out of the single glassless window opening, it was still night outside. The light from the two bowls of tallow was too dim and flickering, he couldn't read the time on his watch face.

It took an hour to pack, get the horses ready and eat a breakfast of stale bread warmed over the fire, goat cheese and some leftover stew. No coffee or tea, of course, nothing but the goat's milk obtained minutes earlier. The strong taste almost made Ryou retch. He let Darius finish that, but he ate all the rest of the food placed before him, wondering how long it would take him to stop feeling so permanently hungry after only a few days of fasting and exercise.

Eventually he, Darius and the horses stood behind the passer at a spot near the barn. A thick pre-morning mist had clamped down on the land during the night. Ryou could barely make out the marker stones. He stared numbly at the limited surroundings; he hadn't gotten as much sleep last night as would have been wise.

"So are you boys traveling further than Aksum?" asked the old lady as if she were idling away the time, waiting for a bus.

"We'll see where the winds blow us," Darius answered, staring straight out across the clearing.

"The winds of war are what are blowing down that way, my boys. Aksum's taking a stand against the Imperium, so's Assyria, Ur and most of the free cities. War and demons are everywhere these days, go as far as you can to avoid them." The passer chewed her gums, then glanced up at Ryou. "I'd wager you're from considerably further away than that, aren't you, my boy."

Both Ryou and Darius tensed.

"The moment I saw you, I knew you were from further out even than Sung. Are you from Ezo? Or from some other place I've never even heard of?"

"Ezo?" said Ryou blankly. Then his mind imploded. "You mean the Republic of Ezo!!"
"Yes, yes, republic. Can't get my head around all your different kind of kingdoms," grumbled the passer dismissively. "Oops, come on, it's time to go," she added, nodding at a thin streak of lighter grey at the edge of the horizon.

"But-

Ryou found his elbow caught by Darius, who shook his head. "Shh."

"But- but she said the republic of Ezo."

"Yeah, that or any other country she can think of is fine of as long as it's somewhere in the Outlands."

"But the republic of Ezo doesn't exist. Not anymore, I mean. It was a- a small state created temporarily by refugees from the Bakumatsu-"

"Ryou, concentrate."

"On what?"

"On not thinking too hard."

Ryou opened his mouth and then closed it.

The Republic of Ezo. How could that exist here? And didn't they- didn't they have steam power, for god's sake? Didn't they...? Ryou had always had high scores in every subject matter including history, but the latter was due to his ability to easily memorize dates and numbers. He'd never really bothered to look at history as anything more than that.

It didn't make sense for Ezo to exist cheek by jowl with the Roman Empire, or an offshoot thereof. Ryou didn't believe himself to be particularly chauvinistic, but common sense as well as a little bit of patriotic pride told him an army of Bakumatsu survivors would send the Roman legion decamping at great speeds.

Though by the sound of it, they were far away from here, inasmuch as this concept applied to the Outlands. The Per Gathas restricted movements of large forces and technology. The Imperium had gotten around that by creating a groundswell of locally trained legions everywhere in their territories; sheer numbers might defeat technology, since most of these Outland pockets of civilizations they called 'countries' tended to be quite small. And isolationist for the most part, Ryou remembered. From what Darius had said, it seemed the Empire had created a morass of territories on its side, while the Assyrian, Ionian, Aksumite and now-gone Persian Empires had done the same on theirs, and so in this 'region' of the Outlands everything was confused, but other countries kept their borders more hermetical...

Ryou stumbled against a clod of earth and got a sharp look back from Darius. Right. Not thinking. Not thinking at all.

The remains of the night were grey around them, blurring distances and the landscape's relief. A bird called out stridently from the moorland; the pre-dawn felt thicker and more silent by contrast. Ryou narrowed his eyes in concentration as the passer led them forward. Darius was right behind her, leading all three horses so that Ryou could walk immediately at his side.

Now that he was concentrating on it, their progress bordered on the ridiculous. The passer, who hadn't struck Ryou as being senile up until now, wandered all over the field, muttering to herself. Darius followed her as if he were walking a minefield. Even the horses seemed to pick up and put
down their hooves exactly in her footsteps. It was as if their group were making their way through a maze with invisible walls. From Darius's incurious accumulation of hearsay, Ryō had gathered they had to cross the border with the aid of the passer, in order to not get lost. Lost in a circle of terrain half the size of a football field. Darius had also said the Paths opened and closed depending on the time of year and the cycle of the stars. That put the science behind these famous borders on par with astronomy, as far as Ryō was concerned.

Ryō stumbled along, feet catching against outcroppings of turf, wondering just what the hell they were doing. Darius looked back at him sharply once or twice, but otherwise said nothing.

Their ludicrously roundabout approach finally got them as far as the stream. The passer, who was barefoot, climbed arthritically down the bank, raising a flurry of bugs and mosquitoes. She hiked up her breeches and walked through the water which rose no higher than her bony calves. Ryō, Darius and the horses followed, Ryō inwardly sighing as water drenched the bottom of his trousers. Now he knew why Darius had asked him to not wear his shoes.

*What-

Something deep within Ryō turned upside down with a jerk that felled him to his knees. He barely heard the splash as he landed in the water. One of the horses whinnied in alarm behind him; it sounded miles away.

"Ryō!"

He couldn't pinpoint where Darius was calling him from, even though he knew his friend was right in front of him. Ryō focused his eyes-

*but deep inside, a sense he did not know about was still stirring, feeling-

"Ryō- don't- oh Inder, don't do anything stupid." Darius was holding him around the shoulders. Ryō could feel it now.

The sense inside - neither smell, touch, sight, feel or taste - was not actively doing anything. But it was no longer dormant as it had been before.

"...Dar..."

*It was...learning..."

"Darius...?"

"Oy, what's wrong with him?" came a creaky voice from up ahead

"He-...nothing. He's alright." Darius sounded a little relieved when Ryō blinked and focused on him.

"This is not a good place for a fainting spell, my Lord from Ezo or Wherever," snapped the passer, not moving from where she stood on the far bank. "Get up and walk."

Darius helped Ryō to his feet, steadied him, then clicked his tongue and pulled at the horses.

The air warped around Ryō - yet it was only inside his head that it was doing so. His eyes and every other sense were telling him everything was perfectly steady. The schism was giving him motion sickness. He leaned against Darius and focused as much as he could on the passer up ahead. And...it was odd...almost frightening...but now when she took one step in *this* direction and three
steps in *that*...he almost knew why, though he could never hope to put that knowledge into words.

There. Now she was going to go straight to the stone markers, which were looming up ahead amongst the trees. Trees...? They'd been in grassland before, and hadn't there been mist?

Whatever had taken possession of Ryou abruptly stopped when he set foot on the beaten earth beyond the stele. Ryou staggered as reality abruptly recovered and the world around him became rock solid again.

"Ugh. What was that?"

"Nothing, you're fine now," said Darius with an undertone of warning. Ryou glanced around and noted how the passer, who'd stopped next to the stele, was looking at him curiously.

"I'm no physician or priest, my young men, but I do think your friend should see one."

"Maybe you're right," said Darius. He was still holding Ryou by the shoulders, the horses from their lead in another hand; those blighted animals always behaved for him, Ryou noted sourly. "What is the closest dwelling from here?"

"Besides my inn?" said the passer with a croak of a laugh.

"Yes, the next one to the south."

"That'd be this little mudhole called Kegsum. It's a dump. Even their goats can't make good milk, and what passes for the priest of Hygeia is a dotard of more than five-dozen seasons. He comes to my inn to drink at times," she added as if in explanation. "Can't hold his beer. You'd be better off riding north and east to Alipia, or if his head is really knocked loose, you'll be in Palis itself in five days where you'll find the Grand Hall of Hygiea, the best wine in the country and a Path that will take you anywhere you want."

"I think-"

Whatever Darius thought was lost to Ryou as something twisted deep inside.

It had some similarities to what he'd walked through a few minutes ago, but whereas the previous sensation had been nothing more than weird and disorienting, this one was undiluted wrongness. And this feeling Ryou was familiar with. He knew what it meant.

There! Inside the circle!

The stelae, the circle, the passer, Darius, the horses, and the spot from which radiated that feeling of twisting turmoil, all turned into hard, cold facts like stones on a board. Ryou weighed the situation in an instant and acted. Though not on instinct, because instinct, that animal sense of self-preservation uppermost, was telling him to go the other way as fast as he could.

He wrenched free of Darius's hold on his shoulders, shot past the horses who were just now starting to lay back their ears and roll their eyes. There was still nothing visible, but it was nearly there now, it was about to arrive and it could already be sensed.

Ryou lunged at the passer, grabbed her by the scrawny arms and threw himself back again.

"Ry-" Darius's exclamation was cut short when he had to turn and wrestle with the panicking horses. Only when he was well away from the circle did Ryou turn to look back. He got a smack from a
staff on the side of his head for his pains. "You! You! How dare you?! Attack a passer! Drag her from...By His Name..." The last words were a weak croak. The passer had seen it too.

It wasn't a Bher Rajiin this time. It was...Ryou stared at it, but it wasn't some man in a mask as reason demanded, no, it really was a dog-headed person. It - he, manifestly - was naked, crouched, arms dangling between his legs, staring at them. No, staring at Ryou. Ryou couldn't tell if the look was predatory, hostile, friendly or what. The expression was unreadable on that parody of anything natural. Ryou's first impression of it being a dog was incorrect. It wasn't an animal, certainly not any recognizable breed. Some insane god had taken a normal man's face by the chin and yanked it forward into the shape of a muzzle, covering the skin with short brown hair until the result looked faintly like a greyhound, though the forehead was too high and the set of the eyes was all wrong. The eyes...the eyes had been human. Once. Now there was nothing there at all that Ryou could recognize.

The thing made a wuffling sound, nose scenting the air, and then it slurped a wet dog's tongue over its muzzle. A human hand reached up to scratch at its chest, which was as hairless as the rest of his body. Then the hand dropped to dig thick, blackened nails at its privates. The dog head started very suddenly at the shoulders and sat atop a long hairy neck, Ryou noted academically. His stomach was not so interested in all this scientific data; it roiled and threatened to heave up this morning's cheese. He would have thought that a child of his century was pretty inured to anything weird through television and manga, but seeing in real life a- a man's face twisted and pulled into the shape of a dog - the reality of it violated some natural law, it was obscene in a way a drawing or the best CGI could never be. Plus the thing stank like an unwashed kennel.

Darius cursed like a soldier behind them. One of the geldings had broken free. Darius used the long lead to whip another one across the rump to cow it into submission.

"Zaratusra protect us," the passer said weakly, which put paid to Ryou's faint hope that things like this cropped up regularly during border crossings.

The dog-headed creature stared at Ryou for a whole minute. Then it looked down at the edge of the circle, between the two stelae they'd crossed.

I was right, thought Ryou, then had to go fish through his facts, some of them born of a sense he could barely understand, to figure out what he was right about.

"Ryou, get the hell away from that!" Darius shouted, hauling his whole weight against the horses' bits to stop them from bolting.

"It's okay," Ryou said matter-of-factly, "it can't get out of the circle." Because inside the circle the world was in flux, weaker, while out here it was real again, and this creature could not go from one to the other unassisted. Ryou couldn't put his reasoning into an equation or even words that made sense, yet he felt as sure of it as the ancient mathematicians were sure of their unproven theorems. The answer, more than that the root behind the answer, was in his possession, even if he could not demonstrate it.

When Darius didn't say anything, Ryou glanced around. Darius was staring at him. Behind his hard, dangerous expression, he seemed to believe Ryou's assurances. Even the horses seemed to believe him. They were still rolling their eyes, huffing the air and laying their ears back, but they weren't panicking anymore.

The passer blew out her breath and suddenly brought down the tip of her staff with a thump. "You're right, of course. You! Go away! You can't leave the Veil, you foul git, so you can bloody well clear off!"
A ripple had run through the ground where the passer's staff had struck, Ryou could sense it even though his five regular senses told him to take a reality check. Her last two words had echoed with a power and a presence that went beyond the mundane as much as the dog-head did. The command went right through Ryou's head, a sharp pain, and both he and the dog-creature flinched.

The creature's eyes twitched in her direction, though it didn't meet hers fully. It dipped its chin and hunched its shoulders, licked its chops. Wary perhaps. Not fully intimidated.

Then it stood up. It had a tail, a long, brown, whippet-thin tail, now held low between its legs. The creature slouched as it walked away, a gait that was neither entirely animal nor entirely human.

Ten steps and it suddenly disappeared as if it had been plucked off the map of the world.

Ryou rubbed the aching point above his temples without daring to blink or look away from where it had vanished, in case it was a trick. He didn't think it was. It felt gone.

The passer blew out a breath of air. "By the Praised One's name," she said. She'd drawn a copper medallion from her tunic; a flame with a set of stylized wings. She was rubbing it between thumb and forefinger. "That's not what I expected from a quick jaunt into Palis of an early morning. I'd heard of weird things up and down the Paths, but that...Is that why you grabbed me, young man?"

"Yes, that's right," Ryou lied without hesitation. His head was still spinning from all this, but he remembered Darius's words of caution. Besides, he was too used to playing things close to the chest. Show them nothing. His hand did not shake as he pushed up his glasses over eyes that felt they were about to pop out of their sockets from a sudden bout of migraine.

"You say other things like this have been seen before?" Darius asked from behind them.

"Like this? I don't know about something like this. But I've heard things from other passers, travelers, scribes and the Per Gathas couriers. Odd things. Some people say it's the war. That's bull, of course. There's been a war somewhere within reach of my Paths ever since I was a girl, and that's not yesterday, let me tell you, yet I've never seen anything like that before. Of course some people say its signs of end times and the unraveling of the Veil and the Grand Design," she added, rubbing her nose, "but they've been saying that since I lost my maidenhead, so I'll not listen to them either. Well, well, well, live long enough and you will indeed see everything...I wish you luck on your travels, boys. May the Path-maker guide your footsteps and hold His hand above your heads."

Ryou took a few seconds to react. "Wait- what? You're going back in there?"

The passer looked back at him. She was already halfway to the nearest stele. "Of course I am, young man. Where else would I go? My home's right over there." The inn was indeed still there, up on its hillock beyond the stream, despite the fact that Ryou's reason and inner sense both told him he and Darius were now in another plane than the one they'd breakfasted in earlier.

"But what if that thing comes back? What if there's more of them?" Ryou took a step to follow her, but stopped when Darius hooked him by the elbow.

"If there's more, I'll kick all their naked asses." The passer stomped her way between the stones. "They'll not be polluting my circle with their half-baked shadows, let me tell you. I've held this inn fast and straight during waves in the river that tried to put me plumb into the middle of the Void itself. That fleabag might have tried to creep up on me, but I'm expecting them now. And the inn itself is thrice blessed, protected by water, fire and my fravashi, they'll not set skin nor hide in there." She was already in the circle, her voice dropping to self-directed mutters.
Ryou turned towards Darius. "We should-..." But then he shook his head. "No. Sorry. That'd be stupid. She's better off without me anywhere in that circle."

"Probably." Darius wasn't watching the passer (who was now threatening a perfectly innocent patch of turf near the stream with her staff). His eyes were sweeping the rest of the circle and the forest around them. "Either way, it's none of our business."

"What do you mean? That thing was my fault, wasn't it?"

Darius spared him a glance that seemed heavy with meaning. "Oh, you know this for a fact?"

"Well... it was looking at me."

"You're the one who moved towards it at a run and snatched an old, weak prey from it. Of course it was looking at you, any animal would."

Ryou thought it'd been more intelligent than that, though he could not back that with any proof.

"Truth to tell, I'd be happy if that thing slipped out of whatever hell it was hiding in because you did something dumb. Though I'd still be mad at you," Darius added as an afterthought.

"What do you think it was?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Yes, you're just a simple soldier. Darius-..." But Ryou had promised himself that he wouldn't ask anything Darius wasn't willing to tell him.

The silence hung awkwardly between them for a few seconds, then Darius shrugged. "Let's just say, you screwing up is a better option than my enemies having found us."

"Oh."

"It will make the next passing all the more interesting," Darius said with a humorless grin. "Come on, let's catch that dumb bugger of a horse that managed to get away with our luggage, and get moving."

Ryou looked back at the inn. The passer was across the stream now, walking up the slope to her inn.

"Ryou."

"Wait a second. I just want to be sure she gets back okay."

"And what if she doesn't?"

"What?"

Darius gave him a hard look.

It made sense. Ryou knew he'd not be able to do anything if he saw her attacked. It was clear by now that without the passer helping them, he could not negotiate the circle. He'd be insane to try it on his own; he knew enough now to know at least that much. But he turned and watched her progress anyway.

"Ryou-"

"It will only take a few minutes," said Ryou.
"You'd be better off not knowing," Darius told him.

"No," Ryou retorted, "I would not."

Darius scowled at him, and Ryou, expressionless, looked right back. Then Darius made a 'do whatever the hell you want' gesture and went to get the horse.

Ryou watched for ten minutes as the old passer reached her inn, circled around it suspiciously, checked in her barn, went indoors and then out again. She stood there, one hand on her hip, then she noticed him. He wasn't sure from that distance, but he thought she gave him a gap-toothed grin as she waved.

A shape, naked and white as a maggot in the dawn half light, dropped from the inn's roof and lumbered towards her.

Ryou thought he saw her turn, staff raised-

- but then the inn was no longer there. Just a stretch of dirt on top of a small hill in the center of an empty circle, forests all around.

Ryou was a step away from the circle, a hand against the nearest stele. But he knew he couldn't go in. He sank to his knees on the turf trodden for decades of her feet passing travelers to and fro.

No. No. But maybe she'd be okay. She had to be okay. This was his fault. He hadn't known. He still didn't know, he didn't know how to help-

Ryou balled his fist and smashed it helplessly against the stele. All that got him was bruised knuckles and a sense of just how totally helpless he was.

"Oh hell," Darius muttered from somewhere behind him.

Ryou stirred. He wasn't sure how long he'd been kneeling there, watching the space where the inn was not reappearing.

"I found the horse," Darius said after a minute of silence. "Come on. There's nothing we can do here."

Ryou took a deep breath. "I know," he said as he got to his feet.

Darius gave him a searching look, then nodded as he seemed to find what he was looking for in Ryou's eyes. "We'll buy provisions at Kegsum, that place she mentioned. If they have a priest of Hygiea, they'll have a temple of all gods. I get along well with Inder and a few others, I'll leave a silver obol for her safe passage."

It was obvious Darius really thought this might help, though for Ryou it wasn't even a sop. "We can get help from that priest she mentioned."

"No."

"But he can warn someone-"

"They won't get back in time to help. And either way you cut it, one of us is implicated in this. Back in Assyria, I can protect us, but if the Per Gathas learn about this and we're all the way out here with our asses in the air, they'll drop us on the wrong side of the Veil and let the Furies pick at our livers. Come on."
The jingle and snorts of the horses sounded loud in the silence that surrounded the two men as they saddled up. The now empty circle was in a clearing surrounded by stunted trees bearing small, dark green leaves, their canopy rising no more than a couple of meters above the riders' heads. The ground beneath them was dry, with little underbrush. Even though it was only half an hour past dawn, the day was already warmer than it'd been back in the previous country. A path wound its way from the circle through the forest, and it took very little to encourage the horses to take it.

When they were fifty meters away, Ryou heard an odd noise behind them, like someone in the far distance coughing very loudly and musically. He twisted around in his saddle. So did Darius, for all his 'go and don't look back' attitude.

"What was that?"

Darius had reined in his horse to better listen. "...A cock's crow. She had one for the chickens. Maybe that's a good sign."

"I still can't see the inn."

"When all is dark, you cannot see the unlit lantern," Darius muttered, quoting something. Then, more firmly, "Let's move on."
Chapter 14

The first leg of the journey past Kegsum was made in silence. The shock of what they'd witnessed - and likely caused, Ryou reminded himself grimly - had cast a pall over them. But he didn't have the leisure to think back on the episode extensively; a somber Darius pushed them on hard, pressing both Ryou and the horses down small rutted roads, occasionally cutting across fields, fording streams and skirting hills amidst a countryside vibrant with heat and sunshine. There was something a little exaggerated about the hurry. Later that evening, when an exhausted Ryou had finished currying an equally exhausted horse that only half-heartedly tried to nip him, it occurred to him that maybe Darius had been trying to distract him and get his mind off of what had happened to the Passer this morning.

Their rapid trek had taken them into the middle of an olive grove, with only a deserted stone shack nearby, empty until laborers would come later that year to collect their crop. Ryou and Darius stayed there that night, sleeping in turns as Darius had promised. Thus Ryou was awake to watch the dawn rise through eyes gritty with fatigue. He missed coffee so much in these moments...

The countryside coming to light around him was dry, with bracken and small trees pushing their way up through rocks and reddish dirt. Goats bleated from a distant hill, though Ryou couldn't see any sign of human habitation other than the small shack in which Darius was still sleeping. Ryou breathed in deeply. The air was still fresh at this time of day, but rich with a fragrant, resinous smell that promised heat to come. A single bird sung high and fluty in the nearby olive grove. Ryou watched the sky turn a beautiful blue touched with purple, the stars winking out. The fate of the Passer still weighed on him, but this moment in time lifted his spirits despite himself...Ryou shook his head, focusing once more on the here and now, and went to wake Darius.

Two hours after dawn, they crested a hill and found themselves looking down at a road winding through the valley below. It wasn't a sophisticated Imperial highway like the one they'd used back in the Province of Tot, their previous location. This road was a wide stretch of beaten dirt; Darius had found it by spotting the clouds of dust rising from its traffic. Because it might be more primitive, but it was also much busier.

"Didn't you say this country was at war?" Ryou asked, watching the streams of people below them.

"Their southern regions saw a lot of battles. They were one of the areas where the Alliance stopped the progress of the Legions. But the Palisians never joined the Alliance; they're merchants, not warriors. Whenever they get attacked, they open their coffers, pay a bunch of Greeks a small fortune and let them do the fighting. In the meantime, their citizens go on making money by trading. Still..." Darius's gaze was fixed on the dozens of people on the road, and he looked puzzled. "That's a lot of travelers even for Palis. All going in one direction, but they're not refugees...Wait." Darius put his hands up to his eyes to shield them from the morning sun and focus his vision. He squinted for awhile, before muttering, "Those magically ground spectacles on the end of your nose have to be good for something. Can you see that paddock near the crossroads?"

"Yes, I magically can."

"Don't be smart with me...Those are oxen in there, can you describe them? They're all black, right?"

"Yes. There's, um, five or six of them. They've got..." Ryou narrowed his eyes and tilted his head to figure out what he was seeing. "I think their horns are painted yellow, and they've got something red around their necks."
"Garlands," said Darius with intense satisfaction. "Part of a hecatomb. Sacrifices," he added, when Ryou looked blank. "The priests will keep them at the crossroads so that travelers can pay an obol in honor of the gods, then they'll march them to wherever the other animals are being assembled. Don't you have this back in your land?"

"No, we tend to sacrifice nothing bloodier than rice."

"I bet Palis has organized Games," Darius said, not really listening to Ryou's answer. "Either that or the king's dead, and I don't think people would be quite so happy to travel around if that were the case. This is great, the way south will be safe while the truce is in effect, and there'll be so many travelers, we'll never get noticed. Inder favors me again. I'm going to have to put something on His altar too when I get back."

Ryou nudged his horse to follow Darius, making his way down the bluff towards the road where they joined the steady trickle of people heading southwest.

There were other riders on mules and horseback, but most people walked or lead oxen-pulled carts. Ryou watched them discreetly as he and Darius passed them by. In ten minutes he saw twice as many people as he had in all his travels up to date. Everything and everyone looked exotic to Ryou's eyes, particularly the richer people dressed in fine clothes riding in some of the carts. The teamsters leading their oxen were dressed more plainly and uniformly, in brown linen tunics and sandals, many of them wearing thin leather straps around their wrists as well. Slaves, Darius mentioned in passing when he caught Ryou's curious glance, reminding the latter of one of the more unpleasant aspects of Antiquity he'd managed to forget until now.

They ate a lunch of lamb stew and unleavened bread at a series of stalls that had sprung up around a stream without any town to call their own. While Ryou was stretching his legs and trying to find a discreet corner to pee in, he saw at the back of a stall an elderly woman armed with a rod savagely beating a young girl, barely a teen. Ryou opened his mouth instinctively—...The girl was crying and wailing, as well she might, but Ryou had the feeling from the lack of frantic or shocked note in her cries that this had happened before. The girl did not have a slave mark; the woman could be her mother...He left without either of them noticing his presence. If they had, the woman might have stopped out of respect for a customer of their common group of stalls, but he suspected that as soon as he was out of sight, the beating would resume all the more savagely for the small embarrassment he'd caused.

That scene, as much as the notion of slaves and animal sacrifices, drove home how much of a foreigner he and his 21st century notions were here. When Ryou finished his business and made his way back to the stalls, the strong human and animal odors, the yells of people haggling over the price of a bundle of grapes or a piece of bread, the colors and the clothes and the way so many of the men were armed, hit Ryou with a sense of alienation that he'd not had since he'd first arrived in this country. Darius, holding the horses, with his beard starting to look a little raggedy, his long hair wild and uncombed, the hawk-like scrutiny of his surroundings, the armor on his back and the weapon at his side, looked once more as outlandish and intimidating as the day Ryou saw him facing the Bher Rajin.

The look Darius was giving him was not that of a stranger, though. "What's wrong? Tired?"

There were no words for what Ryou was feeling right at this moment, at least not for someone who liked to treat communication with the exactitude of mathematics rather than waxing philosophical. "Just the heat and the noise. I'll be better once we're on the road again."

Darius nodded and then, out of the blue, gave Ryou an approving clap on the back. It took Ryou completely by surprise and sent him staggering accidentally into the baggage gelding, to the
amusement of two naked toddlers watching from the shade of the nearest pavilion.

By late afternoon, their voyage had led them to a small town, houses like square boxes of baked bricks painted reddish brown by dust. The highway broke into a multitude of tiny alleys with only one big thoroughfare. Traffic on the road had been getting heavy and the town itself was packed with travelers. The Games were in Palis, the city at the center of this country of the same name, but flocks of merchants and travelers were taking advantage of the truce to move about, and a large fair and market would be held near the temples. People in Palis knew to take advantage of good business when it came their way.

Darius led his horses through the small streets, looking for an inn that wasn't yet packed. Ryou followed with his own animal, staring around as discreetly as he could while avoiding the numerous goats living in back yards and in the houses themselves, and surely outnumbering this town's normal population three to one.

The sheer variety of people walking around was bewildering. Women covered from head to toe in yellow or brown robes walked alongside others dressed in halters and knee-length skirts and more bangles than could be counted. Patriarchal beards flowed over heavy woolen robes worn to the ground; oiled muscles shone beneath the sunshine and armor; boys ran past in loincloths, so did a few young girls; hair length varied from shaved to never cut at all; sandals were commonplace, but boots and bare feet were not rare either; and then there were the really strange things, like a woman in elegant red and green tunic and veils walking past with what appeared to be a melting cone of butter on her oiled and plaited hair. Tattoos, makeup, paint or kohl, crude or elaborate, spread over skin ranging from pale to darker than ebony.

...But if there was one skin color that did stand out in this riot of tones and styles, it was unfortunately Ryou's.

At first Ryou thought people were staring at him because of the bruises decorating the left side of his face; they didn't hurt much anymore, but they'd exploded into a Technicolor palette of red, blue, purple, yellow and black. There were other people sporting black eyes, though, as well as bruises, fresh wounds or scars. Life around here was tough, and a few injuries weren't going to be that startling. A few more pointed stares finally clued Ryou in. His features. In Japan Ryou's straight features were judged 'somewhat handsome once one got past the severity', according to the assessment by the secretarial pool back at Ujiie Trading & Security, and mentioned one night by Sasaki when the latter was exceptionally drunk. That was back in Tokyo, though. In this region of the Outlands, Ryou was downright exotic. The closest he saw to Asian faces were five people dressed in lambskin and heavy robes who had typical Mongol features.

Even in this sea of variety, Ryou was getting more than his shares of second glances; intrigued, appreciative, or a little hostile. The hostility was explained when Darius stopped at a stand selling bread, fruit and honey. The shopkeeper took one look at Ryou and snapped, "Hey, if the fucking Empire of Sung has curled up behind its walls, arrested all foreign traders and stopped all caravans again, why the fuck should I go out of my way to trade with you?"

"He's from Ezo," said Darius without looking up from some figs.

The shopkeeper, a redheaded man with a bushy beard surrounding a brown face, looked sullen and uninterested in the answer, but neither was he in any hurry to argue further with Darius. Darius didn't buy anything and left soon after that. At the next inn that turned him down, he stared at the paved road ahead of them, full of tents and shacks and people.
"Let's move on," he suddenly said.

By nightfall, they'd found an open stone quarry a few miles along the road. Most people had stayed in town, but even here a few travelers had gathered; tinkers and laborers who did not want to pay inn prices. Ryō and Darius picketed the horses nearby and joined the dozen men and a couple of women gathered around a common fire, all chatting energetically, laughing loud and not a little drunk.

Darius stared at the flames for awhile, accepting without much thought the common jar that was being passed around, a mix of alcohol and some sour juice.

"We're going to avoid towns from now on," he said softly for Ryō's benefit alone. "We'll take the herder's high way through the hills, it's slower but not as busy and it'll skirt Palis. We'll be camping out a lot. We'll go back in town tomorrow and buy some decent bedrolls."

"...Is this my fault?"

"You do stand out a bit," said Darius with his usual offhand bluntness. "But it's safer all around. The closer we get to Aksum, the more I might run into someone looking for me."

They got up early the next day, before the other pilgrims stirred. Darius asked a local goat herder for directions, and an hour after that they got to the designated fork in the road. Nobody took the path up the slope where a crude stone tower dominated the sky; all the travelers stuck to the broader road. In fact Ryō noticed they turned their faces away from the path up to the tower, and avoided even glancing at it.

Darius stopped the horses and looked up the path with a certain lack of enthusiasm.

"What the hell," he finally muttered, pulling at the bridle to turn the horse's head. "Inder, watch out for this favored child of battles, and for this magian too while you're at it."

"Uh, is there some risk?" Ryō asked, looking at the empty road.

Darius didn't answer - hardly reassuring - and led the way up the slope. The path was shale and beaten earth. Ryō could feel his horse's muscles coil beneath him as it climbed, the slant of its ears a silent reproof to the idiot humans who'd left the nice, flat road behind.

It wasn't a tower but rather a solid monticule, as high as two men, made of piled stones without mortar. The top was flat and paved, with knee-high edges. It wasn't inhabitable, and it was surely too low to be a watchtower. "What is that?" Ryō asked.

"Tower of Silence," Darius answered shortly.

"What's that?"

"If you don't know, you're better off. It's not my religion." He muttered something about crow-bait and nudged the horses by faster.

So it was some sort of religious artifact. Ryō nodded to himself. He'd figured out by now that, for all Darius's hard-headed practicality and fearlessness, the man was deeply superstitious. The supernatural worried him more than the natural, probably because the natural could be attacked with
a sword.

The majority of the population shared this proclivity. There'd been a plethora of small temples back in the city, more than seemed reasonable for a place that size. And that wasn't the end of it; Ryou had seen a dozen small ceremonies throughout yesterday, in town or along the side of the road, near fords in the river or at roadside altars. People prayed out loud, bowed ritualistically, got down on their knees, or stood with their arms outstretched or even laid on the ground in the case of a filthy man in a loincloth who'd made Ryou think of some Indian swami. That was the small end of the scale, the larger end comprising the sacrifice of a hundred bulls and a countrywide truce and games in honor of the gods.

"Religion seems to be very important here," he said, raising his voice to talk above the crunch of hooves over the shale cluttering the dirt path.

That got him an odd look, one of many he'd gotten when he asked Darius a question that didn't make it across the cultural gap. "I guess."

"How many gods do these people have?"

"Here in Palis? Only five."

"...Only five?"

"Huh-uh." Darius shook his head in commiseration. "I think some king decreed it a few centuries ago, so they only have five; two gods, two goddesses and the Path Maker, who they consider the God of Trade and head of their pantheon as a result. Bunch of merchants..."

"But I saw dozens of different symbols and statues."

"That's everybody else."

"What?"

"Palis worships those five, but then there's the gods of everybody else. Palis is a Free City and a big center of trade, there's a lot of foreigners living here, as well as Ionians and people fleeing the Imperium."

"Oh. Oh, you mean there's freedom of religion here?"

"Huh?"

"Palis doesn't force them to worship their five gods?"

"Anybody living in Palis has to tithe to the temples, if that's what you mean," said Darius, puzzled.

"But they don't ask people to convert to their religion? Give up their gods for Palis's?" he added when it still seemed his meaning wasn't getting across.

Darius finally got it and looked honestly shocked. "What kind of land do you come from? Just because I live somewhere, I don't expect to have to give up worshiping the gods of my fathers. That'd be- why would any other god listen to me in the first place?"

So proselytism didn't exist here? For the hundredth time, Ryou wished he'd paid a bit more interest in history, instead of memorizing facts that looked likely to come up during a test and then doing Life and Death Go problems under his desk. True, antiquity in the West wasn't a subject that had come up
in school anyway, but if only he'd just grabbed a book at the library one day...Ryou's notion of the history in the West was one of massive religious wars leading to missionaries cropping up everywhere in the world; it'd not occurred to him that Darius's Outlands took a stance towards religion that more closely approached those of Ryou's home country and civilization. Wasn't antiquity a much harsher place? "So all these religions co-exist peacefully? There's never any strife amongst the communities?"

"Oh, all the time."

Ryou rubbed his forehead. Darius had gotten them cloth hats to protect them from the sun, but he still had the impression one of them had gotten heatstroke. "Isn't that seen as a problem?"

"I suppose, but some things are just inevitable," said Darius with a shrug. "The Khaldini are the worst when it comes to rioting. They believe it's wrong to tithe to any other god than their own. They do it anyway, right, but then they riot about it. In Assyria, we chased them all out hundreds of years ago, but there's still a lot of them in the Free Cities and in Aksum. The Nairat will stone a man who seduces one of their women, and that always leads to a lot of tensions and reprisals. And there are a plenty of ancestral dislikes between sects; back when I was a child, some worshippers of Marduk up and decided to attack this group from the Tribes of Judea inside Sura itself. That was a mess. The guards hung dozens of the buggers from the ramparts as a warning to just resolve their differences with a foot race or a wrestling match next time."

"Did none of the guards worship Marduk?" Ryou couldn't help asking, his mind dwelling on religious repressions that'd taken place not too far back in Japan's past.

"Huh? No, of course not. Only Assyrian free men can be in the army. You really have some funny ideas," Darius said with an amused smile.

"Didn't you say you worked with a lot of mercenaries?"

"Sure, but they're not part of the army, they just fight for us because we pay them," Darius informed him kindly. Ryou rubbed his forehead again.

"The Hounds are a bit different," Darius conceded, not noticing Ryou's reaction. "We're a weight's worth of all kinds of grain mixed together; Assyrian, Aksumite, Free Cities...That's kind of new, but I tell you one thing, there's only one altar in camp, and that's to Inder. Well, and Hygeia of course," Darius muttered with a pious glance at his arm-braces. "So, what gods do you worship, Ryou?"

"Oh, Shinto is a religion of Kami, of, uh, elemental spirits and gods," Ryou evaded. He'd always been a confirmed atheist, and he was pretty sure he still was. The world has proven itself considerably stranger and less logical than he'd believed, but he didn't think he needed to resort to spirituality to keep his grip.

"At least you're not a one-god man, then. Not that I mind as such," Darius immediately added with a placating gesture directed at nobody present, "but I just don't understand it, and I had it force-fed to me for five years during the Roman occupation."

"So the Romans did try to convert Assyrians to their religion," said Ryou, now thoroughly confused.

"Convert? I'm not sure what you mean, but I don't think so," answered Darius, not faring much better. "They did try to teach His way to us children, and that sucked. But I guess that's fair; since they'd invaded us, their God must have won the heavenly battle over ours. So they got tribute and the temples for their god, and we had to make do with house altars for ours."
But the Romans had not tried to dominate or wipe out Assyria's religion. Heavenly battle...Gods of our Fathers...Ryou nodded to himself. Wars were fought for the reason Darius enounced frequently when he talked of past conquests: for livable land to expand beyond the small pockets of country Zaratusra had originally designated, or for goods, trade routes, cities, slaves or even sacrifices. Religion just followed as a matter of course, the way the culture would; it wasn't a cause in itself.

"So Romans are monotheistic," Ryou finally concluded, catching up on the import of the conversation.

"Uh, yeah," Darius said in his 'even my horse knows that much' tone of voice.

"I didn't realize these Romans were already Christians." Ryou's grasp of European history was weak, but even he knew about the Roman Empire and its relation to Christianity.

"What's a Christian?"

Or not.

"Christian?" Darius mused. "I think I've heard that before, but that's from much, much further away; a bunch of city-states that call themselves the Dukedoms. I think our Genoese cannoneer is from there. But they worship three gods, don't they? A man, a woman and a spirit?"

"I couldn't say," said Ryou weakly, not even willing to guess anymore. "So who do the Romans worship?"

"Aten, of course; ever since they destroyed the Egyptians a thousand years ago and took their god home like some kind of prize. Crazy Imperials. We've added gods to our pantheon through conquest, sure, but we don't throw out the old ones. Come on." They were far past the Tower of Silence now, the road had flattened, they were riding through hills full of short, dry shrubs, lone trees and olive groves, and Darius was obviously in a much better mood. He touched his heels to the flanks of his horse and picked up some speed, smiling in the sunshine.

Darius was swearing, using some very inventive terms that the Gift of Zaratusra managed to handle, and some untranslatable words that nonetheless scalded the humid air. "Move you miserable beast!"

The baggage gelding snorted, made an unconvincing effort to get out of the mud, and then settled down again.

Darius gasped and stepped away from the haunch he'd been trying to push. Ryou let up on the animal's bridle and gave the creature a disapproving look. His mount and Darius's had gotten through the boggy ground with only a minor struggle. Ryou didn't know much about horses, but he had the feeling this one was not so much stuck in the mud as reluctant to give its back hooves the good pull needed to free them. The puny humans shouting at it, pulling at it and thwacking it with a stick weren't about to change its mind.

"Fuck it," Darius muttered, leaning against a tree. "Sod this bloody country. When it doesn't parch your throat with dust, it tries to fucking drown you."

Ryou had to agree. At first, the rain had been pleasant; it'd been so stifling hot. Now the air was tepid and big fat drops had been falling all day, soaking them to the bone and turning the countryside into a slew of mud.
"Here, Ryou, come around and help me push the damned mule."

Ryou gamely threw the horse's reins onto its withers, circled it and squelched into the mud, barefoot. That spared his shoes, but who knew how he was ever going to get the bottom of his trousers clean. This was where having a knee-length tunic like Darius would come in handy. Though not particularly right now, Ryou thought, trying not to smile at the mud-man beside him.

"Can we lift it out?" he asked, looking dubiously at the horse's rear end. How heavy was a horse anyway?

"No, we just need to give him a good shove here, near the stifle. Make him take an instinctive step forward and the daft bugger will realize he can move. Then we'll probably have to chase him," Darius grumbled, and added a couple of ancient Assyrian curse words Ryou hadn't heard yet.

Ryou put his shoulder gamely to the horse's rear end, imitating Darius's gesture-

The horse whinnied and stepped forward.

"Whoa!"

They both staggered. Ryou managed to hold himself against the horse's backside, Darius slid off of it and landed on his knees in the mud.

The horse took another nervous step forward, and then a longer stride. Ryou lunged after it, to grab its bridle and stop it from fulfilling Darius's prediction-

It felt like both his feet were stuck in cement. Ryou gasped, windmilled, and ended up doing a belly flop into the muck.

He scrabbled around the mix of heavy mud and water, shook some of it out of his eyes as well he could.

A hand landed on his shoulder. "You okay?"

Ryou pushed himself up to his knees, breath coming back again. Darius was beside him. He looked at Ryou and his mouth opened as if he was about to say something funny, but then he broke down laughing instead. He tried to catch himself and laughed all the harder, shaking helplessly, hands and knees in the mire.

Ryou contemplated dumping some mud down Darius's neck, but he'd probably not do well against the retaliation, and Darius was already so mucky there really wasn't much point. He wiped his face - Darius's laughter redoubled. Ryou looked down at his hand and sleeve, which looked like he'd borrowed them from The Swamp Creature. Ryou gave up and let Darius's laughter infect him, because that was really the only possible reaction to the situation.

Up on firm ground, the baggage gelding stared at the pair of loons laughing wildly in the muck.

On the fourth day, Ryou saw a city take shape in the distance. He'd thought it was a rocky hill to start with, but it was entirely manmade; sand-colored square buildings climbing up tight streets and skirting a large, central oblong which was the King's palace. There was no wall around the city, Ryou noticed with some surprise.
"The Greek mercenaries they hire would fight off any bandits or tribes that tried to attack Palis," Darius explained. "They'll fight small armies from neighboring countries in the plains, on a proper ground of their own choosing, the old-fashioned way. That's if the army is puny, of course. Anything bigger, the Palisians will either buy them off or else let them in, pay tribute and then make a mountain of money off the men. Merchants, I told you. But that's the way things were done for a long time. The walls around Sura - the capital of my country - were only built at the time of my great-grandfather. Before that, you captured cities, you didn't attack them. Things change, though. Looks like the Games are still in full swing around the Temple of the Five Gods," he added, pointing to a hill some distance beyond Palis, with an imposing set of buildings like a second town collectively bigger than the King's palace. Around the hillock, a city of tents had sprung up. Ryou couldn't see where the Games were being held, but it certainly looked like a lot of people were taking advantage of them.

"Come on," said Darius, pulling on his bridle. "We still have a ways to go before we camp tonight. I want to get to Kazanstar before too many more days."

"We're not going to Palis itself?" Ryou asked, more in confirmation than because he'd particularly wanted to see this antique city bursting with people who might think he was from the Empire of Sung Ch'ao, enemy of free trade. Though he would have liked to have the opportunity to wash his clothes in something other than river water and take a real bath in a public bathhouse; he still had mud in unexpected places.

"No, we'll stick to the hills like we've been doing up until now," said Darius. "We could go faster by taking the Path that starts near Palis to Kazanstar direct, but..."

But he didn't want to risk going through a border more times than required, Ryou gathered. Remembering the old passer, he knew the feeling.

"Well, there's no saying for sure that we wouldn't have to wait a twelveday for the Path to Kazanstar to open from Palis. The footsteps of Zaratusra can lead us very far faster than they can lead us to our neighbor at time. By horse and hard riding, I know for sure we'll be where we need to be in three days time, and we'll be relying only on ourselves. Come on."

That night they slept beneath a full moon and the stars. Ryou watched the night wheel above them while it was his turn to stand guard, and didn't mind missing out on traveling a Path a little while longer.

"Have you ever seen the base of these continents?" Darius quizzed.

"Base? The continents are floating on giant magma beds, you can't see their base."

"So how do you know they're not resting on the belly of a goddess?" Darius asked reasonably, giving the fire a poke with a stick.

Ryou had had the feeling that question would come up sooner or later...He could explain seismography to Darius or he could give up and ask Darius for another campfire tale.

Darius kept up a quick pace during the day, but he let Ryou and the horses get a fair amount of rest too. Since the humans were no longer quite so tired from walking on their own two feet, he and Ryou had time to sit by a fire for an hour in the evening, cooking up their rations in the pot they'd
looted off dead mercenaries over a week ago. And they'd entertain themselves. Darius seemed to think it was obvious that this time before one of them slept and the other kept watch was going to be spent telling tales. His civilization didn't know television or even radio, after all.

Ryou had wanted to know more about 'the onion', the world Zaratusra had apparently found or made, but Darius didn't have any information. Countries were there; they were populated when people back Inland found them 'somehow', particularly during periods of expansion or while they were fleeing decimation. "That's how Assyria came about," Darius had explained. "Assyria - the old country - had been knocked back in a series of defeats. Assur itself was besieged by the Babylonians. So our people in the west of the country made their way to the Outlands. How? How the hell should I know, ask the Path Maker if you can find him."

This had led him to recount creation myths about both the original Assyria and the Outlands, stories that were definitely more entertaining than informational. Ryou was then badgered into reciprocating, digging up tales he'd forgotten since his early school years. What was interesting was that, for Ryou, they were myths. For Darius, they were a gilded version of real facts. Yet he asked Ryou for Japanese beliefs and seemed quite happy to let them coexist with his own.

Tonight their conversation had been more about 'real' matters. Darius had told Ryou about the campaign of Ur, in which he'd fought against the Romans. He'd told Ryou about it in detail. Great detail. He was using twigs and pebbles to represent the various units moving around when he must have realized he'd lost his audience somewhat.

Then he'd questioned Ryou some more about the Inlands. Ryou was trying to oblige, but a lot was getting lost in translation.

Ryou picked up the piece of bark that had represented Terentius's advanced guard. "You said you were with a mobile unit that can easily harass Roman legions."

"Not 'easily'," Darius muttered. "Yeah, we're the Hounds of Assyria."

"Your leader is Lord Ghan which that rhapsode was telling us about, back in Tot, right? The one who's with Terentius?"

"Ghan the Beast is his name, and well deserved," Darius snorted. "There's not a single Lord in our unit and Ghan's no exception. We're a band made up of mercenaries, raiders and killers, and we all hate the Imperium and those who serve it. We're not a solid force like Terentius's units, but we can cut supply lines, sabotage walls, destroy small units and bait the bigger forces into an ambush by our infantry. And people fear us. They just need to hear that the Hounds have slipped their leash and are coming their way, and all those sodding farmers pull up, make for the hills and stop feeding the Imperial armies."

"Why do they call him the Beast?"

"Because he's not a pleasant guy when crossed," grunted Darius, corking the jug of watered down wine they'd been drinking from. "In reality Terentius is the one who does all the work, but it's useful to have a guy around who can make grown men tremble at the mention of his name. It's all about winning in your enemy's head before you even get on the battlefield, like my brother says."

"Your brother? He's in the army too?"

Darius didn't answer right away. He fiddled with the hempen ties that kept the cork sealed while they traveled and from which the jug was suspended from a saddle. Ryou got the feeling Darius had said more than he'd wanted to. "He's not a grunt like me, if that's what you mean, but he's got a position
of importance in this war, yeah," Darius finally said with a shrug. "Never mind. Maybe you'll meet him, assuming we make it through the countryside and get to where we're going in one piece. Tomorrow we'll be at the start of the Kazanstar Path, and hopefully in Essin soon after that. At that point Inder alone knows what's awaiting us. Come on, you need to sleep if you're going to spell me in five hours."

Ryou took off his glasses, rolled up in his blanket, and closed his eyes...Tried to tell himself that Darius's refusal to tell him more than dribs and drabs about himself was not annoying (hurting?) him a little...

Darius was a few meters away, sitting on a stump facing the direction of the path they'd been following all day. He was singing softly to himself in a toneless way; he said it kept him awake. The man had a tin ear and a voice better suited for shouting orders. Ryou found himself smiling in a crooked way, expression hidden in the darkness. When Darius told fairy tales, he looked all of twenty five. It was easy to forget he was involved in something dangerous.
Chapter 15

Darius rode up to the stelae but did not cross into the circle delimiting the Kazanstar border. Instead, he shouted until the passer stepped out onto the flat rooftop of the two-story inn fifty meters away, and then he shouted some more until he got his question across.

Ryou was hanging even further back, trying not to look anxious, furtive or guilty. He didn't make out what the passer hollered back. It was when Darius rode back that Ryou learned that all their hurry had been for naught; the Path to Essin was closed, something about the war. The Path to Anwat, the neighboring province, would lead them close enough to make their way to Essin, but could not be traveled for another three days.

"At least it isn't three dozen," said Darius, trying to take it philosophically with only mitigated success. Ryou understood his companion's urgency get back, though he himself wasn't in any hurry to cross another border.

The days of waiting were spent quietly. A forested hill half a kilometer from the border inn gave them shelter. They made camp by a stream rushing down the slope and bisecting the circle of stones in the valley below. Darius spent that afternoon bathing and relaxing and doing martial maintenance stuff to his sword, javelin and bow, but by the next day it was obvious that Ryou's friend was constitutionally unable to sit quietly for any length of time. He was out hunting and just generally riding around most of the day after that. Ryou, by contrast, took advantage of the time to rest up, scrub his skin raw in the cold water, eat plenty of the rabbits and the tiny, wild pig Darius shot and roasted, and recoup his reserves. He'd been riding the edge of the latter for awhile now.

But mostly he sat on a rock and stared down at the circle of stones from his perch in the hills. Thinking, and trying to feel. It was perhaps a dangerous thing to do, but Ryou estimated that it was just as dangerous to not have any clue at all when next he walked one of Zaratusra's Paths. Between doing nothing and hoping for the best, or trying to gain some ascendancy over his abilities and the situation, the choice seemed obvious, particularly for a self-confessed control freak like Ryou.

The inn stood squarely in the centre of the clearing, defiantly prosaic and real despite the physicist's nightmare going on around it. A lot of people stayed there before traveling on. Ryou kept count of them and averaged it to thirty a day with a wide variance which might correspond to when a particular Path was available. Ryou idly calculated the margin of error on those crude statistics, and then how long he would have to sit here and observe before he could bring that margin down to an acceptable dimension...while deep inside, a sense he could not yet name, much less control, watched the people come and go, winking out of existence once they and the passer waded through the rushing stream. Like a radar, this inner sense sent out regular feelers as it waited for the passer to come back, and then it watched the man stroll over the dry grasses and rocks in a zigzag path that should make no sense at all, and yet spoke to Ryou on a level too deep inside to clearly distinguish...

"Damn, you should have seen the size of the buck that got away!" exclaimed Darius, and Ryou realized that his banal sense of hearing had registered the clip-clop of horse hooves for a few minutes now. "If only I had a decent beater to get the bloody animal to go up the gulley...Are you still feeling tired?"

"A little," answered Ryou, hoping to avoid getting dragged off to hunt tomorrow.

From the way Darius was studying him with faint concern, that had not been his intention. "Considering what you told me about the Inlands, I'm surprised you held up so far. Would it help if we went to that village the passer mentioned and let you rest in a proper bed for a night or two? It's
only three miles away."

"Oh no, I'm fine," Ryou said contradictorily. Between roughing it out a few more days, and sleeping in a village as dirty as Kegsum and others he’d seen, Ryou was ready to heed the call of the wild.

Darius studied Ryou and decided to take that at face value. "For the best, then," he said, unfastening the girth of his horse. "Any place near a border is expensive."

Ryou looked at him in surprise. "I thought we were camping out here for discretion, so that your enemies won't get wind of us."

"That too, but I don’t want to waste money. With any luck we’ll be with Assyrian troops in three days time, but no man can tell what the Gods write in their tablets on his subject."

Darius was cautious that way, always an eye out for supplies, food, shelter and defenses like a good soldier and one used to living in a land with no convenience stores, visas and safety nets. If all else failed, he could live off the land for awhile and make do that way. Ryou was acutely aware of how helpless he was by contrast. He'd be hard-pressed to earn a living even if he stuck to the cities of the Outlands. He could not do the simplest manual task most of these primitive cultures required, either through lack of strength or lack of knowledge. And though the merchants of Palis were reputed for their business acumen, they probably couldn’t use a financial expert of his kind. Since he had no clue what the gods were putting on his tablet, maybe he should-

"If you’re not too tired, do you want to go hunting tomorrow?"

...should start learning how to flush deer out of gulleys, it seemed.

The day after an exhausting hunt in which they almost got that buck, they made their way to the border inn just before nightfall. They had to stay in the inn for the night if they wanted to take the dawn Path, but by common accord they slept in turns and only lightly, even though Darius had told Ryou that nothing should happen until they crossed the river and took the Path tomorrow.

The Path to Anwat was busy; half a dozen people crossed with Darius and Ryou the next morning at dawn. The passer was a portly young man with the overbearing manner of a bus conductor who won't ruin his schedule for one passenger's sake. Ryou would have still felt terrible if the man had gotten himself devoured by eldritch creatures, so he kept a close watch on his own mind and senses as he waded across the fast-running stream.

"Nothing happened," he breathed once he and Darius were past the stone circle.

"Are you okay?" Darius asked dryly.

"Just dizzy. From the...you know." It'd felt like falling off a cliff once more, though this time Ryou had managed to keep to his feet rather than taking a nose-dive into the water.

"I was talking about the strain in your back and shoulders." Darius's hand landed at the base of Ryou's neck and gave it a quick teasing squeeze. "You looked like you're about to break like glass."

Ryou thought Darius sounded mighty flippant for a man who'd been just as wound up while crossing the rill. But the nervous tension and the effort he'd expended trying to control a part of himself he barely understood had drained him too much for witty repartee.

"So this is Aksum," was all he said as he got up on his horse - he could manage without help these past few days - and glanced around. "It looks a lot like Palis. A little greener."
Darius gave his surroundings a comfortable look. "Assyria is a lot like this as well."

"...Who are all these people?"

The circle of stone was surrounded at a distance by an even larger circle made of tents, firepits, impromptu paddocks with a few livestock, wagons, hand-drawn carts and people. A few gave Ryou a disinterested glance and returned to their pots, animals, children and business.

"Refugees waiting to walk a Path, or just people sticking to where it's safer. Essin is at war, has been for awhile. A group of soldiers might pillage these farmers' animals and pay with wooden talents; bandits won't even leave them that. No army would dare besiege or interfere with a border, though, so they're safe here, but they're not allowed closer unless they're actually traveling and willing to pay the fare."

Darius was about to add something else when he tensed and let his hand drop to his sword. Ryou followed the direction of his gaze to see half a dozen armed men on horseback circling the tents and wagons, making their way towards the pair of them.

"Who-"

"It's okay, I think," said Darius, relaxing a fraction. "They're king's men from Aksum. They're on our side. Greetings, friend," Darius added to the man in the lead.

At Darius's words, there was a certain loss of tension on the other side too. The soldiers stopped carrying their javelins in a way that suggested they were a scant second away from using them. They were not wearing uniforms, their armor was disparate - Ryou had had a flashback to Gex and Gaius - but they all had small shields and thin round metal helmets painted with the same motif of highly stylized sheathes of wheat. The man at the front had a short cape made of sheep skin with the wool still on it, despite the rising heat of the day.

"Assyria?" he said, looking over Darius in surprise. "What the hell are you doing coming through here?"

"I've traveled through from Tot," said Darius, an explanation that explained absolutely nothing, but he said it with a business-like assurance which made it hard to point that out. "Is Essin still under siege by the armies of the Alliance?"

"Last I heard, yeah, but we've been on patrol for the past four days. They blocked the river five days ago, so it'll be coming to a head any day now. Who are you? Which army do you belong to?"

"My name is Darius, my mother's name was Polenius. I'm one of Ghan's Hounds. And you are?"

The leader of the Aksum patrol had drawn his horse up side by side with Darius to talk. He was close enough for Ryou to note the widening of eyes when Darius mentioned his unit. Ryou measured what Darius had meant when he said the Hounds struck fear; even their allies treated them with cautious respect, it seemed.

"Huh...I'm Macedini from Daksosor, watchword officer. Um..." the patrol leader glanced from Darius to the Gates and back again. He looked like he had a mighty big question to ask but was now unsure he really wanted to ask it. Ryou felt for him. There were no papers in these Outland countries, no ID, no written and carbon-copied orders, not even a set of dogtags to back up Darius's claim of being an Assyrian soldier. Neither was there radio communication to their leaders, most of whom were several days away. Ryou briefly wondered how these ancient armies could function at all.

"I have some important information for the General and Lord Ghan," Darius continued on briskly.
"Can I get through? How are the lines?"

"Well, that's why we're here," said Macedini. "The lines are fast between Essin and Miribel, but there's been reports of small troop movements along the river road and around the Essin border. We're supposed to check anyone coming through Anwat who's obviously not a farmer, and detain anyone who's from the Imperium or from Kaides for interrogation."

"Kaides?" Darius's eyes narrowed. "Interrogation by whom? Who gave you that order?"

The patrol leader hesitated, but there was an air about Darius that did not invite the answer, "Why the hell should I tell you when I don't even know if I should be arresting you for being suspicious or not?"

"Um, it was an Assyrian freeman. I don't think he was a soldier. But he carried sealed orders from General Terentius so my commander set up our patrols. He was one of King Leyam's men. Rand the Khinite, I think they call him."

"Rand?! Rand is at Essin?" Darius leaned forward on his horse in sudden eagerness.

"Um, yes-"

"I should have known he'd show up out of nowhere and take charge of this mess." A brilliant smile lit Darius's features. "Inder personally guides that man's footsteps. That's even better. Come on, Ryou, we need to get to Essin as soon as possible."

"Um-" said the patrol leader. He had his hand on his sword's hilt but a very dubitative look on his face.

"If there's enemy patrols and scouts around, can you and your men ride with us to Essin?" asked Darius, turning on the man.

"What? Er, no, our orders- we're being relieved in two days, we could escort you then."

"That's too long. Never mind, we'll manage. If Rand's there and in the know, he'll have other patrols out. Come on, Ryou. Oh, how do I get to the Alliance headquarters? Are they still on the banks of the river?"

Macedini's mouth was open and a helpless look plastered over his face. The five men behind him were looking from him to Darius, equally uncertain. "Uh, yes."

"We'll just follow the river road, then, it's the only passable route from Anwat to Essin anyway, I remember from my maps. I was here less than a month ago," Darius added with a bemused shake of the head. "A lot's happened since. Carry on, Macedini from Daksosor, and next time I see Commander Zossen in Aksum, I'll mention your name."

Macedini made a sort of "Whu?" sound behind them. Darius had already kicked his horse into a trot and Ryou's had followed.

"We're nearly there," said Darius as he led Ryou past a broken-down wagon abandoned by the side of the road. The terrain between the two provinces was very rough, boggy and craggy in turn, but the ancient road that had been carved through that terrain centuries ago had facilitated their progress. They hadn't seen a single fellow traveler since they'd crossed into Aksum yesterday morning. Anybody who was going to cut and run out of Essin had already done so. It was now mid afternoon,
the rough terrain had given way to fields and meadows these past two hours, the river the road had paralleled for the past day and a half had slowed and broadened, and Ryou was looking forward to a future where he would not have to ride a horse or otherwise travel and camp out for a few days.

"So the Empire of Aksum is as large as Assyria, and Anwat and Essin are just two of its provinces," Ryou recapitulated. They were alternating stretches of trotting and walking the horses, the latter allowing for a modicum of conversation.

"Yeah. Like Assyria, Aksum started as a city-state built by refugees from an ancient Inland empire. Kush, if I recall. And like Assyria, Aksum eventually spread and engulfed its weaker neighbors. That was a thousand years ago or more. Most people can't remember where the lines of the old countries are anymore, except there's a Path starting in the center of each province that used to be an independent territory. Some do remember, though, when an Imperial snake infiltrates our lands and finds those satraps and lords who are ready to forget who their master really is, and who think they can break off of the father land and become their own country again with the Imperium's support."

"But why is it the Assyrian army and the Free City army of Terentius who are attacking Essin if we're in Aksum?"

Darius gave Ryou an appraising look. "You caught that, huh? It's politics. The leader of Essin is pro-Imperial to the hilt. He's been a major thorn in Leyam's side for ages because Essin is a powerful province, and the capital city is sitting near a border that's a major trade route through Zarathusra's Paths. It's been a point of access into Aksum and then into Assyria for the Imperium these past twenty years. But the problem is that Lord Sezerena of Essin is the leader of an important faction of provincial lords, and he's also King Ka of Aksum's brother-in-law."

"Oh."

"So the Alliance sent an emissary bedecked in gold and purple, carrying gems and mhyrr, and officially asked Essin to freely let us take the trade Paths, and stop letting Imperial Legions take the roads through any way they pleased and camp on his land. Lord Sezerena sent back a lyrical ten-page letter of refusal. So we asked King Ka if he didn't mind if we came in and trounced the bastard. King Ka said he deeply regretted the necessity, but he could see his precious allies had been pushed past all endurance by Essin's stubborn refusal to cooperate; the only thing that he asked was that Lord Sezerena be delivered to him alive, if the fortune of wars allowed it. That's political code for 'Slit that Roman arse-licker's throat for me, and I'll deal with my sister.' She's fortunately at the Imperial city of Aksum, so we won't even have to worry about her. Once Essin is down, that'll be the main line of troop and equipment supplies into Aksum broken. After that, we just have to take care of the pro-Roman provinces in Assyria and Aksum individually; they got complacent and quarrelsome and didn't see the danger until it was too late. This is the result of King Leyam's overall plan. They said we could never be free of the Imperium in our lifetime, and now we could end this war in a year."

Ryou hadn't known a war in his lifetime, not one involving anyone he knew. Darius's intensity was fascinating and a little alarming. So this was what it was like to fight for one's sovereign and country...

The fierce light flickered and died in Darius's eyes. "Hey, Ryou..."

"Hmm?"

His friend was looking at him as if he had something difficult to say. "We'll be at the fork of the river Koskal pretty damn soon. It looks like I'll be able to get you home after all. But I should probably tell you a few things about my situation...I've not said a lot about myself. You never asked."
"You don't have to tell me now if you don't want to," said Ryou, while 'going home' echoed in his mind in a way that was not entirely comfortable.

"Yeah, well..." Darius scratched his beard, which had grown raggedy in the two weeks since Ryou had saved his life in a construction site with a Nissan. "Tell you the truth, I don't know why I didn't tell you before. It's been awhile now that I knew I could trust you, and you're going to find out sooner or later, but I guess I just liked-"

Later, Ryou would remember he heard a dry 'tack!' sound over the rush of the river and the clop of the horses' hooves.

Something swished by a meter in front of him. Ryou's horse snorted and reared, and the ground, sky and river interchanged their respective positions. Then Ryou crashed into the rocks and dirt of the road. His right arm took most of the impact. A wet crunch sent sick shockwaves throughout his body.

"Ryou!"

Ryou curled up around the pain in his arm.

"Ryou, get up!"

Tack....swish...thunk!

That noise! An image of Gex staggering back with an arrow in his throat came vividly to Ryou's mind and prompted him to focus in a hurry.

An arrow was quivering in the ground ten meters away. Ryou glanced around wildly, but he couldn't see the shooter. Darius, sword drawn, had swung his horse around and was interposed between Ryou and the river. The river. The shooter was on the other side of the-

"Ryou-" Darius ducked. Ryou didn't see the arrow, but heard another thunk behind him, nearer this time. The river was high and very wide around here, almost two hundred meters to the other side, the archers were having a hard time adjusting their shots.

Ryou scrambled to his feet. Darius had managed to snag his horse's reins. The animal was rolling its eyes, and danced away when Ryou staggered towards it. Ryou used some of the words Darius had inadvertently taught him these past few days, and managed to catch the pommel with his left hand.

The pain was coming in waves, almost bearable at times, at others overwhelming. He didn't know how he managed to get onto his horse, but when he blinked away the darkness smothering his head, they were galloping away from the water and across the ruts of a fallow field, Darius still holding on to his reins, the spare gelding following out of herd instinct. There might have been more arrow impacts behind him, it was impossible to hear above the thud of hooves through ploughed dirt. Ryou clung to the horse for all he was worth and concentrated on not passing out.

After five minutes made of pain and darkness, Darius pulled on his reins and slowly brought the horses to a stop.

"Where are you injured?" he asked tersely, bringing his mount around so he could look over at Ryou.

Ryou held out his wrist, which was already swelling; the fingers were pale and useless. His head and right shoulder also hurt, but that was just bruises.
"Shit," Darius muttered. He leaned over and moved without hesitation, straightening out Ryou's right arm with a smooth but undeniable motion. Ryou ground his teeth together and focused every ounce of his concentration and willpower on the pommel to avoid being washed away by unconsciousness. Darius unfastened and transferred the scabbard of Ryou's dagger from the left forearm to the right, tying the flat leather straps around the swelling with two scabbards, Ryou's and the sheath of Darius's own short dagger, bound on either side to make a rough splint.

"That'll keep the bone from grinding too much." His eyes were flicking ceaselessly from what he was doing to the countryside around them.

"Who...why did they shoot at us?"

"I made a mistake. I should have pulled rank and gotten Macedini to escort us, and fuck discretion. I knew they were not going to let me live with what I know." Darius's face was frightening with intensity and a murderous aura he'd not had when facing those deserters over a week ago.

"They were on the other side of the river. We left them behind. Right?" Ryou had slumped forward in his saddle, cradling his right arm with his left. He and Darius were going to be alright now. Right?

"There's no ford for miles, but they wouldn't have risked a pot shot if they didn't have a backup plan. That's what that signal was for. It'll bring more down on us."

"...Signal?"

"That horn blast. The kind that tells the main hunting party that the quarry's been sighted," said Darius with a humorless grin.

Ryou hadn't heard a horn, but then again the blood had been rushing through his ears at a volume that had threatened to drown him.

"What are we going to do?"

"For starters, we're going to pray to Inder that the idiot tootling away back there will alert some of the patrols Rand deployed and bring an Assyrian squadron down on their heads like the wrath of Assur himself. Next..." Darius didn't say what he was going to do next, but he kicked his horse to turn him back around, reached for Ryou's dangling reins and tugged. His eyes were raking the countryside around them. He headed towards the third gelding, cut loose the packs from the saddle with his sword and then picked up the animal's long lead again.

"Come on, let's get as far as the Furies and those shit-licking bastards let us," he said.

Every jolt of the horse was a thud of pain for Ryou. He counted them, just to give his mind something to focus on. Darius found a farmer's path they could follow without losing sight of the river, and they broke into a gallop. It was actually easier on Ryou than the jagged trot that'd preceded it, though his horse didn't like it from the snorts and short complaining whicker.

Two thousand one hundred and forty two hoof beats later a horn blew, sudden and jarring and quite near.

Darius cursed and drew up, glancing around. Three fields away, what looked to Ryou like an entire army of mounted men were flowing across a hilly meadow.

"There they are. Fuck me, there's only five of them," Darius added, and that smile was back, that wicked cut of a grin that held no fear, no regrets. "Well, well, well, that's almost an insult. Ryou, I'm going to need your help one more time."
"What can I do?" Ryou asked immediately. He trusted Darius to know what was in his capabilities.

Darius gave him a crooked smile and there was a light that was both warm and pained in his eyes that Ryou had never seen there before. "Ready as always, heh? Ei, Ryou, what am I going to do with you." And then Darius the soldier, the survivor, was jabbing an authoritative finger in the direction away from their attackers. "I'm going to lead them after me. Follow the river. Ride as fast as you can."

"You'll be a decoy?! But-"  

"Don't worry!" Darius shouted, he was already five meters away, still leading the spare gelding. "You know by now I'm not the self-sacrificing kind! I have two horses, I can lead them on a merry chase. And when I get bored of that, I can fight! I'll stay within a mile of the river. Go get help! Ask for Rand the Khinite- Terrentius- fuck, anybody! Tell them-" the words were lost in a thunder of hoofbeats- "Hound- Ghan- enemies from Kaides- out here-" Then he was out of range.

"But-"

Ryou bit his lip hard enough to draw blood and whipped his horse's head around. The riders behind him were within arrow shot, though they'd have to stop to shoot at him if he remembered Darius's lessons in antique warfare correctly; there was not enough stability in these ancient saddles and stirrups to draw back correctly while in motion.

The horse galloped on. The pain in his arm squeezed Ryou's heart, but his mind was clear and full of a cold concentration. He did not like Darius's plan, but he had to admit it was probably their best option if they both wanted to survive.

The riders didn't follow or split up to send someone after him. Had they recognized Darius? He and Ryou were dressed much the same- but if this was the enemy that had attacked Darius before and somehow dropped him into the no man's land of the Inlands, they might have recognized him. Either way, they left Ryou alone and all went after Darius, and that left Ryou with the responsibility to go fetch help.
Ryou galloped past three armored men trying to haul a wagon out of a rut. One of them had a crude moon drawn onto his tunic, the same symbol Darius had on his bracers, but Ryou did not stop. These men didn't have horses, they couldn't help.

One of them shouted after him. He couldn't make out if it was a question, an order or a threat over the sound of hooves.

As he pushed his horse onward, Ryou methodically analyzed everything he could see. There was another group of soldiers camped near a pond over there; still no riders. A larger gaggle of tents, women among them—no, not what he needed, but he was getting closer. The river bent up ahead and spread out, a marshy fen over which loomed a large dome-shaped hill. An encampment had sprung up around the prominence, much denser than the others and—There! Horses!

At full gallop and his eyes on what had to be the Alliance army head-quarters, Ryou didn't see the patrol on the path until it was almost too late. Fortunately his horse had more sense and ploughed the dirt beneath its hooves to stop before they impaled themselves on the spears pointed their way.

"Hey!"

"Stop!"

Panting like bellows, Ryou's horse skipped and staggered sideways, away from the group of five pikemen who'd barred the path. Ryou hauled hard on the reins with his single hand to keep his animal from prancing and throwing him off.

"What the fuck—" One of the soldiers moved forwards to grab the bridle, but darted back when Ryou's agitated horse stamped.

The first row of tents and fire-pits began twenty meters beyond the soldiers gaping at Ryou. At the top of the hill was gathered a group of important-looking pavilions, each with a banner in front, hanging limply for lack of breeze: that was Ryou's destination. The distance between him and his goal: half a kilometer and a lot of explanations that Ryou did not have the time to give.

He slid down from his horse—staggered as the jolt to his arm brought tears to his eyes and robbed him of breath, but he straightened up again in a second. He needed to talk to them face to face, and not give them the impression he was about to charge them or run away. "I have an urgent message for General Terentius. It's from Darius Bher Polenius," he said, addressing the soldier armed with a sword rather than a pike, the man who'd tried to grab his bridle.

The man stared at him owlishly. "Who?"

Goddamnit. Ryou had had the feeling Darius was a little higher up the chain of command than his 'simple soldier' image projected, but he was not high enough to be widely recognized it seemed. Ryou swallowed his anxiety and impatience, because now above all was when he needed his self-discipline.

When he spoke, he sounded perfectly in control. "I need to talk to your leaders now. Or to anybody who can send out mounted troops to help an Assyrian soldier twenty minutes behind me. I was riding with one of Lord Ghan's men with an urgent message for General Terentius, but we were ambushed. I need—do you know if Rand the Khinite is here? Or can I speak with Lord Ghan directly?"
The patrolman's eyes had gotten progressively wider, and Ryou, with the instinct of one who'd gotten past the flappers surrounding CFOs and CEOs before, knew he'd bypassed a lot of hassle with his name-dropping.

He repeated the same routine to the patrol's leader, a hundred meters away from the large important-looking pavilions (but nearly ten minutes had already gone by-) Fortunately the man was also impressionable, even though he'd never heard of Darius either.

"Can you give me your message?" he asked Ryou.

"I don't have it, Darius does. Can you send your men out to help him? He's fighting-"

"I can't put together a mounted patrol," the commander said as if offended that Ryou was trying to thrust such a responsibility on him. He was cross, but he also looked worried and wouldn't meet Ryou's eyes. "The only cavalry we have is the General's heavy unit and the Hounds, and I can't order either of them out-"

"Can you take me to Lord Ghan then?" Ryou asked tightly. "Darius is one of his men, he wanted to talk to him."

"I can't bother him over this." The officer pushed, pulled and settled the metal breastplate on his chest in a nervous gesture. The man was middle aged, and Ryou had the feeling he was never going to be promoted to any more responsibility than he already had.

"What's your name?" Ryou asked in a neutral way.

"My name? Okidis Par Lamanes."

Assyrian, Ryou noted, nodding to himself.

Okidis caught the gesture. "Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"If my friend Darius can't talk to Ghan, I will eventually be talking to him myself, and I like to get my facts straight," said Ryou and didn't bother masking the fact that this was a threat.

Okidis gave him a hostile look, and Ryou feared he'd overplayed his hand, but then the captain turned with a curt order to the soldiers surrounding them. "Mason, Je, bring him." Then he set off with a put-upon stomp in his step towards the emblazoned pavilions.

Ryou glanced around as Okidis led them through the camp, keeping an eye out for cavalry with a more pro-active officer. Men in trousers and shirts, tunics, or only skirts and sandals in this heat, moved all around them; they were cooking, cleaning, mending clothes and standing around a sword-sharpeners stone wheel. A large group ringed a stretch of grass where four men were competing in an impromptu javelin throw to the accompaniment of shouts and whistles; others just sat around looking restive. Ryou's escort drew little interest other than a second glance at his features. The army had divided its soldiers into groups of twelve it seemed, each with a single tent and fire, and a fair amount of space between them and the next unit. They were more densely packed down the hill and near the river. A paddock contained the horses Ryou had seen, as well as a long pit mostly covered with board; a change in the breeze revealed this latter to be the latrines. To the east, beyond the hill and the straggling camp, was a town as large as the city of Palis. It looked destroyed, and for a moment Ryou wondered if the siege was already over. But it was only the outlying areas of the town that'd been attacked. The center was on an island between two arms of the river, heavily ringed with walls, and that part looked intact from a cursory glance. The river waters were very low, though, and Ryou remembered someone mentioning the water had been dammed and diverted.
A returning patrol glanced curiously at their small group of four. Ryou knew he was getting close. Many of the men he’d seen so far had been dressed in disparate, incomplete armor, when they were dressed at all. But now the soldiers they passed were in uniform: identical breastplates, leather skirts and metal helms with neck guards. Veteran troops, or perhaps Terentius's well-trained units that had rivaled the Roman Legion itself.

Okidis stopped to ask for instructions from one of these men dressed in well-designed armor and with a long horsetail dyed red attached to his helmet. Fortunately the superior officer was too busy to deal with the matter himself. "The Assyrian commander is with the General and the rest of the leaders," he said, waving Okidis towards the top of the hill. Okidis looked even more put-upon and reluctant once the other officer had gone about his business, but he led Ryou and his two guards further up.

At the highest point of the camp, a long rectangular pavilion with a split personality took precedence over the others. It was made of crude stitched canvas, ugly and utilitarian, but it'd been draped with rich purple banners that stood out by contrast. A golden garland was nailed to an upright spear near the entrance. Okidis settled his armor one last time and marched towards the open flap, with a curt gesture at his men to keep Ryou back for now. Nearly forty minutes had elapsed since he’d left Darius, Ryou's watch informed him. His heart was hammering and he felt very near to praying to Inder himself, or any god who might be likely to listen.

After what felt like an eternity - three minutes - Okidis came out and waved them forward. Ryou was barely holding himself back from breaking into a run, but one of the patrolmen thought it necessary to shove him forward anyway. As a result, Ryou half walked, half stumbled up to the tent. He was stopped at the entrance by Okidis, who'd drawn his short sword.

Ryou knew full well, in an analytical way, that all this ruckus could get him into very hot water, but that was just a byproduct of failure and not worth considering until he’d used every single tactic at his disposal. Darius had asked him to go get help. Ryou was going to do his best.

"Who is it?" asked someone in a crotchety tone. "Who's got a message for me?"

There were a dozen men in the large pavilion. Ryou's eyes had been darting from one imposing uniformed man to another, but now his gaze fell onto a figure wrapped in a blue toga over a tunic trimmed in gold; the man was easy to overlook, seated as he was in a camp chair in front of a low table covered in maps. He was old, in his sixties at least, and visibly ill from the curdled-milk color on his face, with one sandaled foot propped up on a low stool.

That couldn't be Ghan. "General Terentius?"

"Yes? What's this about a messenger getting waylaid? Who the hell are you and where are you from, anyway?" He looked dyspeptic and cross, like an old grandpa whose game of shogi had been interrupted by some young fool.

"From Ezo," Ryou replied shortly, since an answer however wrong was faster to give than the true explanation. "I was traveling with an Assyrian soldier from your army - one of Lord Ghan's men - and we were ambushed not far from here. His name is Darius Bher Polenius. Can you please send someone to help him?"

Terentius's eyes were the wrinkled, heavily lidded eyes of a turtle. They narrowed in confusion as he said the one word Ryou had dreaded above all. "Who?"

Ryou's blood turned to ice and the watch around his left wrist felt as tight and painful as the leather straps around his right forearm. He opened his mouth...but his tongue moved like papier-mâché, and
a wave of dizziness overcame him. How...how was he going to persuade the general of an army from antiquity to send out help for some unknown soldier without a lot of time-consuming explanations...?

"Where's that guy who- where's Ghan?" Terentius asked someone behind him. "He could sort this out. He was here a minute ago, did he go take a piss or something? Meromeidon, can you-"

"What name did you say?" someone asked from the back of the tent.

People shuffled and turned towards the source of the question. At the back of the tent was a long, thin table bearing scrolls, food and pitchers. A man was leaning against it, a cup in his hand but his gaze fixed on Ryou.

"Uh, Darius Bher Polenius," said Ryou.

The other put the cup down without looking and straightened away from the table. As he circled around the group, Ryou could tell the man was huge, half a head taller than anyone present. Unlike the others, he wasn't in armor or richly dressed, just a shapeless brown tunic reinforced with patches of leather, a short brown cloak over his shoulders and mud-encrusted shoes on his feet. His plain, square face was carved with deep downward lines, hair falling in sharp daggers down his forehead and into his cheeks as if they'd dug those ruts there themselves; they hid his eyes.

- Until he reached Ryou, grabbed him by the collar and hauled him up with one hard gesture to stare straight into Ryou's face. Ryou got a good look at his eyes then; they were grey and harder than stone.

The man studied Ryou up close for three subjectively long seconds during which Ryou gaped back at him. Then Ryou found himself lowered back down to the ground which his toes had been barely touching, and a hand fastened on his elbow. "I'll deal with this, General."

"What? What?" The old man leaned forward in his seat. "You know this fool, Rand? What the hell is going on?!"

The last was shouted after them. The man, Rand, had already half-carried Ryou out of the tent and away to the left, ignoring the general.

"Are- are you Rand the Khinite?" Ryou stuttered, following the other's long strides with some difficulty, not that he had much choice. The grip of fingers on his arm suggested that it was either that or be dragged.

The bangs had once more closed like a curtain over those hard eyes, but Ryou felt certain he'd just been gifted with a short, sharp glance. "Darius mentioned you," he found himself saying in pure knee-jerk defensiveness. "He said you could help," he added a little more constructively. "We were ambushed on the way here, enemies from, uh, Kaides he said. Darius sent me to get help. He said he'd try to stay within a mile of the river. It took me- do you know what minutes are?"

"Yes," answered Rand without bothering to mention where he'd learned it from.

"It took me twenty minutes to get from where I left him to the edge of camp. Twenty-five more since then."

"And who are you?" asked Rand, glancing down at Ryou, face still hard.

"Ujiie Ryou, I was traveling with Darius, we met on the way," Ryou answered, once more choosing expediency and simplicity over a complex truth that would keep them mired down for too many
minutes, and might lead his audience to conclude that Ryou was a nutcase. "Can you please send someone to help?"

Rand gave a grunted "Hmm," which could mean anything, but which Ryou just had to hope was assent.

They walked fifty circuitous meters away from Terentius’s pavilion in the direction of the river, weaving around smaller tents. Lower down the slope, Ryou spotted a makeshift paddock with two dozen horses, and there were more picketed near the individual tents surrounding them, so it certainly looked like they were heading in the right direction. Though they’d not gone that far, the mood was different here. They were no longer in the ranks of Terentius's crisp, professional pseudo-Legionaries. Amongst the dozens of men Ryou saw, he could not find two that matched when it came to shoes, helmets, tunics, skirts or trousers; the same was true for skin tone, hair color and features. The only thing that united these men were black scarves around their necks, worn like a badge, and hauberks of bronze lamellar, relatively light compared to a Legionary's breastplate. They also shared a certain lean, mean, hungry look, but that might be Ryou's knowledge coloring his perception of these troops known as the Assyrian Hounds.

Rand stopped so suddenly Ryou staggered. "How many men did you say?"

"Uh, five-"

"Jexen," Rand called out. "Where's Lord Ghan?"

A tow-headed man sitting on a box three meters away glanced up from where he was replacing the leather strap of a sandal. He looked at Rand and then at Ryou in surprise, then jerked his thumb towards the pavilion at the center of the small circle of tents, a blood-red banner bearing the circle symbol planted before it.

"Is he available? I need to see him."

The question seemed to puzzle Jexen. "What? Oh, sure, go right ahead, sir, he's-"

"In the meantime, I want you to get a squadron on horseback."

Jexen's surprise turned to amazement, but he dropped his sandal, grabbed the javelin that'd been resting against the box and walked away with nothing more than a quick, "Yes sir."

"Thanks," said Ryou, almost giddy with relief as he turned back to Rand.

Those grey eyes were still lurking behind the bangs, and Ryou felt himself to be under scrutiny, even suspicion. Ryou couldn't blame the man; he was ready to concede that his appearance here and his request must seem extraordinary.

"Let's go talk to Lord Ghan," said Rand.

"Okay."

Rand didn't move immediately, though; he stood there looking down at Ryou. Behind them, Jexen was shouting and people were pouring out of tents lower down the slope and saddling their horses. Just as Ryou was wondering what the hold up was, Rand made a short gesture indicating that Ryou could walk without getting dragged this time.

"Lord Ghan," Rand called out as they neared the canvas, but the rest of his words were buried in a sudden baying of hounds.
A man inside the pavilion cursed, there was some kind of commotion, and then the canvas bulged near ground level. Pegs pulled from the dirt and two huge mastiffs came surging out from under the cloth.

Ryou had never liked dogs all that much, and these two were huge and savage, mouths gaping wide as they charged at him. He staggered back and bumped into Rand.

The two dogs hurled themselves at Ryou, and would have bowled him over if Rand hadn't steadied him with one hand and used the other to shove at the animals. "Down! Down!"

Ryou's heart started to beat again when he realized the dogs were sniffing and pawing at him, not tearing him limb from limb. They weren't quite as big as he'd first thought, but the larger one reared up full length on its hind legs and managed to stuff its nose down Ryou's collar before Rand pushed it away again.

"What is going on out there?" shouted a man emerging from the tent after the dogs.

Ryou got a shock on par with the dogs when he saw a familiar face.

"Darius?!" No- no, Ryou immediately realized, this newcomer wasn't Darius. But he was dressed much like his friend had been when they'd first met, and he had the same hairstyle and beard. The resemblance was striking. Could this be- "Are you his brother? Can someone help him?"

"Darius?" said the man, glancing from Ryou to Rand. "Who in Hades is Darius?"

Oh no, not again.

Rand did not answer immediately, and there was some quality to his silence that sent echoes of itself spreading around him. One by one, the men stopped talking and shouting; there was only the whinny of horses and the snuffling of the dogs as all eyes were drawn to the tall man. Rand stood like a ship's mast in the middle of the camp, ignoring everybody and staring only at the dogs sniffing Ryou over. Then he looked back at Ryou, a look that drilled right through Ryou's head.

"It's true, then," Rand said, almost to himself. "Jexen, get those horses. Now. One for me as well."

That broke the spell. Jexen started giving orders with intense rapidity that promised to get things done very quickly indeed. Four men were already astride their animals, and others were dragging their mounts into formation.

"What's going on?" said the man who looked like Darius. "Who is this- this-" he gestured at Ryou, then made a move to get the dogs away from the latter.

Ryou was jerked to one side. Rand frog-marched him towards a horse. Ryou found himself clinging to the animal's hide while Rand swung himself up and into the saddle. Then a strong hand reached down and hauled Ryou up to sit in front of him. The horse snorted and splayed its legs, but it was an animal that matched Rand in sheer strength and size, and it shook its mane and straightened up as if not deigning to notice their combined weight.

"Hang on," said Rand in a voice that suggested Ryou would be unwise not to. "Jexen-"

"Wait!" The other man had gotten hold of the dogs, though they were straining their collars.

"'Darius'? Does he mean-"

"I think so. We'll know shortly if it's really him or not."
Behind Rand, the man called Jexen stared at Ryou, one foot in the stirrup and his mouth wide open as if he’d just figured out something momentous.

"I'm coming with you!" Darius's ringer shouted.

"No," Rand answered. "It's not safe for you to hare off into the countryside on a wild report from some unknown." That would be me, thought Ryou.

"But- Gods damn it!" The dogs had slipped the man's hold and were crowding around the horse, who laid back its ears dangerously.

"Stay here. It could be a trap or a distraction. Let them come," Rand added as the man tried to get the dogs back again.

The man nodded. "Of course. Chamrosh, Zuru, go, boys!"

The dogs were so eager to go they were whining and pawing the ground. Jexen's horse gave them a wide berth as his rider maneuvered the animal forward. "Ready, sir."

"Follow."

The world broke into movement as Rand kicked at his horse's flanks. Ryou grabbed a hold of Rand's arm with his good hand, clung to the horse's sides with his legs, put every equestrian lesson he'd learned these last two weeks into practice to avoid falling off, and finally, finally - forty five minutes and more but Ryou couldn't see his watch face with everything shaking - finally they were off.
"Tell me where," said Rand, and then he and Ryou were hurtling through the camp, past tents, men, and horses and heading towards the river.

"Th-th-th-" Ryou couldn't even talk for the mad pounding rush, but pointed in the direction in which he'd arrived. Rand twitched the reins and the horse veered that way, still at a dead run. To either side of them, stern-faced armed men followed their course.

They'd galloped for a few minutes when Rand made a gesture. Ryou craned his neck and saw two soldiers from the column of twelve peel away and head away from the river. A few minutes later, the same happened again. Spreading out in a search pattern, Ryou realized with sudden relief. They were not only relying on Ryou's directions, which was good. Ryou's memory of where he'd left Darius was precise, but in the time elapsed, Darius could have gone anywhere. Or be-...No, Darius was not suicidal. He knew what he was doing. If he'd made Ryou go on ahead, it must have been the best solution to avoid both of them getting run down by a larger group of armed men.

"Here!" he shouted. He was getting used to the jarring rhythm, and by now his arm had gone mostly numb around the large ache. Now that things were finally happening, now that he was bringing help to his friend, the pain was ignorable.

Rand pulled the horse up hard, gesturing sharply for the others to stay back. Ryou briefly wondered where this man was situated in the Alliance army chain of command. He was dressed plainly and wore nothing more than the usual belt-knife which was the Assyrian utility tool and eating utensil that every man wore. Outside of his height, there was nothing about him that would have made Ryou look at him twice, yet these men obeyed him without hesitation.

Rand shortened the horse's free rein, forcing the temperamental animal to circle around the stretch of meadow Ryou had indicated. He was leaning forward, staring at the ground.

"This way," he finally said, and the world dissolved once more into shakes and jerks as the horse surged forward at a tangent to the river, in the direction of rolling hills.

It took them only a few minutes to find the body.

Ryou's heart stopped when his jumbled vision coalesced into the picture of a horse up ahead, forefoot folded back in obvious pain, a few feet away from a man sprawled in the grass. He instinctively leaned forward and nearly got shaken off for his troubles, but Rand's hand on his shoulder kept him in place.

"Looks like he's blazed the trail for us," Rand commented in a tone that suggested finding a dead man on his path was an everyday occurrence. "This one of them?" he added, reining in his horse right at the foot of the corpse.

"Er- I- I didn't get that good a look- yes, he's got a horn with him." The man also had a cut across the upper chest near the throat like an obscene second smile, flies buzzing around the face and the staring eyes. The dogs were sniffing at him and making muffled yapping sounds. Ryou didn't bother registering that this was now the sixth dead body he'd seen in the entirety of his previously peaceful life. All that mattered to him right here and now was that this wasn't Darius.

"If these addle-brains don't know enough about their quarry to hunt him in a pack instead of straggling out, they'll all be dead by the time we get to the field of battle," said Rand with grim
Ryou twisted around to look at Rand's face and see if the man really meant that, but Rand shouted and kicked the large horse into motion again, and then Ryou's job was to hang on one-handedly again.

The ride became a succession of still shots for Ryou. Fields, many gone to seed; a shepherder path; the grass ahead of them ploughed up by hooves, the tracks Rand was following. The men behind Rand and Ryou rode in complete silence, as did the two dogs that still kept up with them, racing low to the ground, tongues hanging out with what looked like the same determination. For people who hadn't known Darius's name, they seemed intent on finding him now to the point of single-mindedness.

Ride, ride, ride...Ryou kept his gaze fixed on the horizon, hoping to see Darius up ahead, fearing to see another dead body, recognizable this time. How long had it been now? He'd lost track. How long could Darius hold out?

A twinkling of sunlight on water caught his attention. The river was to his right again, a couple of kilometers away, glimpsed between trees and fields. That meant they were heading back towards the large sprawling camp. But from the way Rand was leaning forward and scrutinizing the ground, they were still following the tracks the enemy's horses had left in soft earth and meadows.

Above the sound of pounding hooves and the singular way the blood was beating in Ryou's ears, he heard the ululating note of a blown horn.

Rand pulled the horse up so hard that it sat nearly back on its haunches, hurling Ryou back against the man's chest. He heard Rand grunt, but the arm that caught and steadied him could have been hewed out of oak for all the give it had in it.

Rand looked around as if he could track through the air the sound that had already faded. Then he gestured at the men behind him. "Jexen, follow the tracks. You and you, come with me."

The group split apart as smoothly as that. Rand's horse huffed and ploughed up an incline, away from the tracks which had so far stuck to the path of least resistance between fields and valleys. Three men followed Jexen, two men followed Rand; their forces had dwindled as other pairs of riders had broken off to search. Ryou hoped they'd be able to help once they met up with Darius.

Three minutes later they crested a rise and the so-far desperately empty landscape finally revealed their objective.

Ryou caught it all in a glance. Their rescue party was at the top of a steep valley plunging down, too abrupt for horses to negotiate at any speed. At the bottom of the abrupt grade the ground flattened out into a vale. Darius was eighty meters away, sword drawn, holding his seat bareback on the baggage gelding and facing two other riders. A third man sat on his animal twenty meters further away, a horn in one hand, a drawn weapon in the other, but he wasn't joining the fray. There was no sign of Darius's original horse or of the fourth man who'd been after him.

Even from this distance, Ryou could see the faces of the two men who were trying to corner his friend. They looked furious and frustrated. One of them surged forward to cut Darius off, but Darius plunged away at a tangent and slid past him, angling to keep from getting caught in a pincher movement. The man pulled abruptly on his reins and circled again, obviously wary of Darius's drawn sword. Ryou realized with some amazement that his friend must have deliberately turned to fight, and he was trying to get at the two men one by one.
Then Rand's horse whinnied, the two hounds bayed. A click of wood on wood made Ryou twist around in the saddle. The two men who'd followed Rand had whipped their bows off their backs and notched arrows.

In the valley below, the tableau had frozen. The three attackers were staring up at the lip of the valley. Darius, though, did not turn around. It was as if he already knew who was there. He said nothing, just lifted his sword and pointed it at the third attacker some distance away.

"Shoot the horse," Rand ordered curtly.

*Clack* - the distinctive noise of wooden arrows leaving the bow.

Down in the valley, the observer's steed staggered, arrows protruding from haunch and chest, and fell over on his side, pinning its rider.

"Shit- get the Prince away!" ordered one of the other two men. His companion immediately whirled his horse around in the direction of the fallen man.

Darius struck. He kicked the gelding into motion, surging forward. The first man saw him coming but he was awkwardly oriented to defend, and he hesitated, pulling back on his reins. Darius didn't bother with him, he cut at the horse's face. The animal screamed and reared, throwing his rider to the ground. Darius had already reached the second man, and ran his horse full tilt at the other. His mount checked and tried to stop- but it had too much inertia. It buffeted the second animal's flank with its chest, stumbled and fell, taking the other horse with it. Both men leapt clear.

Darius got to his feet and headed towards the man with the horn who was still struggling to clear himself from the stirrup of his injured animal. But the soldier Darius had just unhorsed shot to his feet and ran to intercept him, putting himself between Darius and the man they'd called a prince. The soldier lifted his sword. Darius, however, did not; he went right on walking as if the armed enemy three sword's length ahead of him wasn't even there.

Two black shapes rushed over the ground of the dell. The dogs leapt past Darius and took the soldier by the arm and the throat, bearing the man down. Darius did not stop.

"Hamado, stay here and keep watch," Rand ordered, turning his horse to take the slope at an angle.

"Yes sir," said the soldier. His brown skin and features looked Aksumite, he must be a foreigner like Jexen and others Ryou had seen. All of the same mold though: the same hauberk, the same black scarf around his throat, the same hard, intent look on his face other than a short flash of white teeth as he loosed a second volley from his bow. Down in the valley, the first soldier who'd picked himself up to run after Darius staggered and fell with an arrow in his thigh.

Rand and the second archer made their way down, shouting at their horses to force them to take the steep incline. The horses picked their way carefully, and snorted when their hooves were on flat ground again.

Darius had stopped a few meters away from the prince, who'd managed to get to his feet and draw his sword. The man looked helplessly at Darius, at Rand and the other archer, then he twisted around at a thud of hooves on sod. If he was hoping for reinforcements drawn by the sound of his horn, then he was going to be disappointed; it was Jexen and the other three men coming down the easier slope of the dell, following the tracks that had led to this battlefield.

Rand drew his horse up with a hard jerk of the reins. Ryou gasped and fell right off, but his fall became a dismount as Rand slid to the ground alongside him, an arm around Ryou keeping him from...
landing in a heap. The other archer had dismounted as well, so had Jexen and the other three. They stepped away from their horses and immediately knelt, head bowed.

Ryou, barely standing on trembling legs, looked at them uncomprehending. Then he glanced around in surprise as he registered the absence of Rand's towering presence beside him. Rand had also sunk to one knee, one hand extended flat before him on the turf cropped by sheep and goats, head lowered.

"My Lord Ghan," he said.

In the sudden deferential silence throughout the dell, the only man still standing was Darius, straight as a sword. And a stunned Ryou, of course.

Darius looked around, gaze going without surprise at the men kneeling before him, but it stopped at Ryou. He looked away again before Ryou could read his expression.

There was a curse from the last unharmed enemy. He wasn't standing either, though that was only because he'd stepped back defensively from the half-circle of armed men and tripped over his horse's hind leg. He was now trying to get his feet under him again and away from the animal kicking weakly in the grass.

The two hounds, licking their chops, trotted up to Darius and slipped their large heads under his hand. Darius looked down and Ryou saw him smile.

"Did Rand bring you too, little brothers?" he said, rubbing a set of ears.

The biggest of the two, blood still on its muzzle, looked like it was going to drop down and roll around the grass in sheer happiness at its master's attention.

"I'd have had to kill them to stop them," said Rand, in a tone that might have been intended as sardonic and exasperated with the fawning mutts, though it wasn't really trying that hard.

"So it was for the rest of us, my Lord," said Jexen with a fierce grin. "Shall I get rid of those other two?" He was referring to the two soldiers, one with an arrow in his leg, the other down with unknown injuries from the dogs.

"Just secure them for now. We'll see how cooperative the master is before we take it out on the curs."

"Ghan..." The man in question had finally managed to extricate himself from his horse. Gripping his sword, he staggered towards Darius. The kneeling men leapt to their feet and their hands fell onto hilts, but Darius waved them back, even though the man was staring at him with such murderous venom it looked like he might attack even if it'd cost him his life.

"Greetings, Yrmah," Darius replied, voice dripping with a heavy parody of courtesy. "I must beg your forgiveness. I know we were supposed to meet over a twelveday ago, but as it happens I was ambushed on my journey to the talks you'd invited me to. Can you believe it? I was quite surprised myself. And here you are, in such a hurry to finally parley with me that you left Kaides and came all the way into neighboring Essin to pursue me. Will you ever forgive me?"

Yrmah glanced around at the ring of hostile expressions, ranging from glares to derisive smirks, but it only made him angrier. He was holding himself straight, though he kept his right arm close to his body as if injured, his sword in his left hand. His high conical helmet had fallen off and there was a contusion slowly swelling up on the right side of his face, from the edge of his curled beard all the way up to the temple. He was dressed in a knee-length garment of small interlocking metal plates, slit at the thighs to allow him to ride; Ryou, with his budding knowledge of antiquity and ancient
warfare, knew this sort of quality armor was expensive, but to his modern eye, Yrmah still didn't look much like a prince.

"You-..." Yrmah struggled with the words, and then they came out like daggers. "We almost had you. I wanted to give Sezerena your head. We'd have had it varnished and put on a spear behind his throne, next to the spot we're saving for your fucking whore of a brother's."

Darius tsked, gesturing back into their scabbard some of the blades that had sprung free. "I'm no politician, I told you that ages ago, but I'm pretty sure that's not how you negotiate. And if you’re just trying to rile me, save your time. Better men than you have failed. The truth is, I don't give a bird's fart about you, Yrmah, or about any inch of that miserable rocky stretch of mountains you call the Kingdom of Kaides. I didn't even care when you threw in your lot with Essin, or when you gave me safe passage right into a trap."

"Safe passage only applies to free men, not to the bastard son of a slave-"

"The ones I'm really interested in," Darius continued as if nothing had been said, "are the people who jumped me and my men in that very, very interesting way right after crossing the border into Kaides."

Despite his mocking tone, Darius was watching Yrmah’s reaction carefully. Ryou, who was putting things together at speed, also looked at the man from Kaides. But Yrmah's face didn't change from its expression of hostility and spite. Either he was too furious to really listen to what Darius was saying, or he did not know that the ambush that had picked off Darius on the way to their parley had used magic to get Darius dropped an unimaginable distance away, almost to the Inlands itself.

"I have nothing to say to you, Ghan," Yrmah spat. "Crawl back into your kennel with the rest of the curs-"

Jexen was at his side before he finished speaking. In an instant he'd kicked out Yrmah's knees from under him and had his dagger at the man's throat. Rand was there a second later, his demeanor much calmer. He moved the blade away from Yrmah and shooed Jexen away. Jexen gave Darius an almost beseeching look, but obeyed Darius's nod and stepped back. Rand took his place without any sign of even the mildest irritation; though when Yrmah tried to get to his feet, a casual hand on his shoulder forced him back down.

"I trust that reminded you who has the upper hand here," Darius said, leveling his sword at Yrmah's chest. "Your last ditch attempt to intercept me today was either clever or desperate. I didn't think you guys would be looking for me from that direction. Somebody knows something of my movements these past twelve days, and it's obviously not you, you poor manipulated sap. Now tell me who's pulling your strings. Who put you up to that parley with you and this Essin emissary who almost certainly doesn't exist? Who set up a trap for me, and who informed you I escaped and would be most likely coming this way? You will tell me, Yrmah, or I'll have you ripped apart by my dogs."

"Keep your threats," sneered the man on his knees. "I'm the crown prince of Kaides."

Darius did not seem impressed. If anything, his crooked smile became more amused and the air of menace around him more pronounced. "Damn, you're right, I forgot. You're the designated heir to your kingdom and I'm just some Assyrian bastard. Rand, my good friend, be kind enough to hold out His Highness's hand."

"What- ow!" Yrmah struggled but it was quite hopeless; Rand had reached down, grabbed his wrist and forced his arm out straight with enough force to make the tendons crack.
Darius smiled as he stepped forward.

His sword slashed out and Yrmah screamed. Ryou twitched his gaze away from the red and pink lumps on the ground and stared at an empty spot over Rand's shoulder. The prince gave another choked cry. Then all Ryou could hear was the pitter-patter of blood falling on the trampled grass. It sounded like summer rain.

"Thank you, Rand. Pick up the prince's fingers and send the one with his signet ring to his father. Oh, let's be generous and send them all. That'll inform him he needs a new heir. Now, what do we do with the rest of him? Chamrosh, Zuru, are you hungry, boys?"

The two dogs beside him perked up. Someone in the back of the small group snickered. Ryou's stomach lurched.

"I'm afraid Prince Yrmah is no longer awake," Rand informed the company.

"After only losing a few fingers?" Darius sounded honestly surprised. Ryou glanced around without looking at the mess on the ground, to see his friend lean forward and grab Yrmah's chin. The prince's face was ghastly pale, the bruise on the temple a swollen red by contrast. "So he is. It doesn't take much to be a prince in Kaides, does it."

"It appears not, Lord Ghan," Rand said calmly, though Ryou had noticed in the part of his mind where facts accumulated that Rand had quickly knelt down behind Yrmah and gripped the unconscious man tightly by both wrists as soon as Darius had leaned forward.

That's what really drove it home, more than the violence. Darius had killed in Ryou's presence before, without mercy other than that of a quick death; with a cold efficiency that suggested that he could suspend even the latter if he had a really good reason to. But in their desperate circumstances, it was nothing more than a matter of survival.

This man who was watched by these fierce soldiers as loyally as his dogs...whose life was so important to them that they'd ridden off without hesitation into a potential ambush on the word of a stranger...men who guarded him and who'd not chance even an injured enemy could harm him, and who would kill and probably die for him...this man was no longer the isolated foreigner back in Tokyo or the man Ryou had wandered the Outlands with.

Lord Ghan. Ghan the Beast.

Ryou turned away and took a few steps towards the horse that had brought him here.

"We won't get anything from him like this," he heard Darius say after a pause. "Let's get out of here."

Since sticking his head in the sand wasn't going to change anything whatsoever, Ryou turned around again. Rand was binding the prince's bleeding hand, the other soldiers were heading back to their horses. Darius wiped his sword on a cloth one of his men provided. His eyes met Ryou's as he sheathed his sword.

Darius studied him briefly. Ryou did not frown, did not look askance, did not look away. Show them nothing...a constant mantra in his life that had somehow become a little too neglected and transparent these past two weeks with Darius, his friend, riding at his side. But that was the advantage of ingrained habits: they came back easily. Ryou knew his face was composed and unreadable. It would not be obvious that this was not to hide an expression, but to hide the fact that he had no idea what expression to make, or what to think or feel anymore.
Darius turned away and gestured at Jexen and another soldier to pick up the prince. He said a few words to Rand, who leaned forward to listen attentively. Then Darius slapped Rand on the shoulder in a way that said more clearly than any words how glad he was to see the other man again, and went to help himself to Jexen’s horse. He had a few cuts on his arm and one on his thigh, and the streaks of sweat down his face were testimony to the arduous ride followed by a fight he’d survived, but Darius jumped into the saddle as if he was fully rested, and raked his men with a look that seemed to sizzle in the quiet countryside.

"Have you all been taking good care of Essin while I was away?" he asked loudly.

The men around him laughed uproariously.

"Yes my Lord!"

"Kept them nice and warm for you!"

"Ripe for it!"

"Let's get back then," said Darius. "It's been a twelveday since I've killed anybody bar these poor sods. I need a goddamned war already!"

Soldiers cheered and leapt onto their horses, the dogs barked and made a nuisance of themselves beneath everyone's hooves. Ryou watched, mind blank and with a feeling he was a million miles away. His head was heavy and the ground beneath him was swaying gently. He reached out blindly, found the side of the nearby horse to lean against. With the attitude all horses seemed to have adopted in his regard, the bloody animal snorted and sidestepped. Ryou staggered and hooked his good arm over its withers, hoping it wouldn't bolt.

"You said your name was Ryou?"

Ryou glanced up and focused on Rand. It was against the man's horse he was leaning, Ryou remembered.

"My name? Yes, Ryou." Why the hell would he insist on Ujiie-san in the circumstances?

Rand examined him as if he was actually looking at Ryou for the first time rather than gauging him as a walking and talking source of information for finding lost Lords. "May I see?"

"What?"

"Your injury, may I see it please."

He's being mighty polite all of a sudden, thought Ryou, extending his wounded arm. Around them, men had saddled up, Jexen sharing with a colleague, the prince of Kaides slung over Darius’s gelding which had not been injured in its earlier tumble. The other two enemy soldiers were also tied and hoisted up like baggage with little regards to their injuries. Darius nudged his horse into a quick walk towards the exit to the dale, then he turned in the saddle to talk to Jexen.

Ryou jumped at a sudden sharp pain in his arm.

"My apologies. It's broken," said Rand, shifting the make-do splints.

"Yes, that much I had managed to figure out."

Rand examined him once more through his bangs, as if intrigued by the absolute flatness of Ryou's
tone and expression.

"We'll have a priest of Hygeia deal with this once we're back in camp," he finally said, gently pressing the arm against Ryou's side. Then Rand unhooked his cloak from the two small metal spikes sown onto his tunic, and bundled the cloth around Ryou until the latter's arm was supported. The pain let up a bit immediately.

"Thanks," said Ryou. There was nobody else left in the dell now. The wind blew, rustling the churned grass. Yrmah's horse was dead, its tongue hanging out, its legs sticking out ridiculously. It'd taken an arrow in the haunch and the other one near the shoulder. The wounds didn't look immediately fatal. Ryou couldn't see too well from this angle, but it was possible one of the soldiers had put the beast out of its misery. The other two injured animals had been led back to camp.

Rand helped him up into the saddle, swung up behind him, took the reins and shook them once, getting the horse moving forward at a measured pace. Ryou watched the edges of the dell fall slowly away, a foreign countryside appearing around them by installments. He didn't say anything, and neither did the stranger riding behind him. The silence after the shouting and the hoof beats was deafening. The bird twitters and animal calls that eventually started up again sounded fake.
Chapter 18

Ryou woke up in a comfortable bed. It was the size of a couch, a carved wooden frame with ropes strung across it to hold a cloth pallet. Rand had informed him in passing that he could make free use of the bed, the tent and everything here; they'd belonged to some officer of the Assyrian army who'd died during the first part of the siege. Despite that somewhat morbid provenance, it was much better than sleeping on the ground in a blanket.

Rand had not taken Ryou right back to the camp on the hill the preceding afternoon. He’d taken a detour to a small encampment in a copse of olive trees, where wagons and tents had been set up in a clearing by a stream. There’d been pallets under every tree and in every tent, with injured men or soldiers who were visibly sick. Ryou counted approximately two hundred. Young men and women, sometimes barely children, were caring for them. All the attendants wore the same knee-length undyed linen tunics and a serious air as they bustled around, changing bandages, beddings and buckets.

Ryou’s injuries were treated by a matronly woman dressed in the same tunic but with a blue robe, open down the front, pulled over it. She’d rolled up her sleeves in a businesslike manner when Rand deposited Ryou before her and explained the problem. Ryou had been swaying by then, and could not tear his eyes away from the snakes tattooed in a circle around her beefy biceps. The priestess of Hygiea held Ryou’s forearm for a good ten minutes while she muttered prayers and intercessions on his behalf, before splinting it up to the fingers with polished sticks and stiff linen on which she painted sigils. He’d have to keep that on for three days, after which he’d be fit to throw the javelin in a week according to her. Then she informed Ryou that he needed a bath and a shave.

Rand, who’d been standing behind Ryou during the latter’s consultation, had taken her at her word. First he led Ryou to the camp barber, who happened to also be the butcher and cook. Face newly scraped clean of bristle, as well as oiled, Ryou ended up in the dead man’s tent with some water to wash in and the bed. Ryou had to admit that all these ministrations had left him feeling considerably better this morning. His broken arm still ached, but nowhere near as badly as it had yesterday, and he could move the wrist beneath the bandages by a few degrees with only some twinges.

The tent, too low for a man of Ryou's height to fully stand in, was a square of three meters by three, one side stacked with a couple of crates and some javelins. An oblong had been cut out of one side to form an entrance. The hide hanging there in lieu of door was askew. From where he sat, Ryou could see a slice of camp life through the slit. Armed soldiers bustled around. He was in the middle of an army, and the safest he'd been since he'd first seen the Rajin over two weeks ago. Forget the likes of Gex and Gaius, he was even safe from mysterious enemies from Kaides and further afield. He'd eaten his fill of a simple but filling barley and goat stew last night, served to him by a soldier who seemed to think it important that Ryou be kept safe and comfortable. Rand had even shown up just before he went to bed to see if his arm was doing better and if there was anything he might need. Quite a difference from a mere twenty four hours ago.

Ryou, sitting on the bed, let his head sink into his left hand and fought an irrational little wish that it were still yesterday, when he was just a wanderer on a road with a companion he thought he knew...

"Excuse me?"

Ryou looked up. A shadow was hovering near the entrance to the small tent. "Yes?"

The same soldier who'd served him last night poked his head in. In the light of day and without the veil of pain and fatigue, Ryou noted that his helper could be no more than sixteen. "I beg your
pardon, sir, but Lord Ghan would like to see you."

"Oh." Lord Ghan. Right. Ryou wished he'd had more time to get used to the idea. On the heels of that thought came the realization that all the time in the world would not be enough. "Fine, I'll get dressed."

"Yes sir."

"...Could I please ask you to wait outside?"

He waited until the tent's flap fell behind a puzzled-looking young soldier, then he got dressed in the clothes he'd pillaged from dead deserters who'd tried to kill him. He pulled on the short woollen pants and linen shirt, but didn't bother with the tunic that he usually wore over them. After all, the weather was warm, he was presumably safe here, and he didn't fancy pulling his still-aching arm through the leather-reinforced sleeve. He slipped it instead into the scarf the Priestess had given him as a sling, dropped Rand's cloak on his shoulders and headed towards the new day.

He followed the young soldier to the large pavilion he'd seen yesterday, the crimson banner in front now unfurled by an early morning breeze. The possible permutations of the conversation he was about to have ran through Ryou's mind with every step. None of them led to a happy place where what was broken would be fixed. Ryou felt tired just thinking about discussing any of it, even as the questions he needed to ask lined up in his head.

"This way," said the young soldier, lifting the tent flap, then added "please" as if remembering a set of instructions.

Ryou blinked at the sudden passage from the early morning sunlight to the dimness of the tent's interior. A flap, cut from the canvas near the highest peak of the tent, had been hauled back and tied into place like a crude sun-roof; on the other side of the tent squatted a metal box containing a surly fire, a pot smoking on its grill. Those two sources of light were the tent's only illuminations.

A rustle and a few mutters surrounded Ryou. He stared without comprehension. There were over a dozen people in the tent, most of them armoured and armed, all of them staring at him. Ryou stood in the tent entrance, wondering what the hell was going on.

At the far end of the tent stood two large men with spears, armour, shields, and the word 'guard' written all over them. One of them turned to a set of tapestries slung over a pole hanging from two of the pavilion's pillars, cordoning off one section. The guard lifted the tapestry an inch and murmured something.

"Coming," someone said from the other side. A few words muffled by the thick cloth, then the corner of the tapestry swung aside to let someone through and Ryou's expectations were further punctured when he recognized the tall figure, which was still not Darius.

"Good morning," said Rand, coming up to him without bothering to glance at the others in the tent. "I trust you slept well? Couldn't that young whelp I sent to fetch you find you anything else to wear?"

"I'm fine," was all Ryou said. The surroundings, these unknown people and the situation made him cautious and unwilling to ask any question.

Rand stood there with the ease of one who at least knew what they were both waiting for. Ryou wondered if he could find it in him to be annoyed...but it seemed counterproductive. Anyway, it was nice to have a slightly familiar face next to which to feel confused and adrift.
"So we agree then. Come on, let's do this before I die of old age," someone on the other side of the tapestry said in a crotchety voice Ryou remembered well. Operating on some unknown signal, the two guards each pulled aside one of the tapestries and General Terentius stepped through followed by the man Ryou had known as Darius.

A small, dull shock registered in the pit of Ryou's stomach. Darius was dressed the way he'd been when Ryou first saw him; his beard was trimmed, his hair clean and knotted with small disks once more, and he was wearing a knee-length dark red tunic sewn with small scales of blackened steel, with finely tooled leather armour strapped over his shoulders and upper chest. The whole was complemented by a black leather neck-guard around his throat that reminded Ryou of the scarves worn by his men. He looked both archaic and striking, as if he were once more the foreigner killing monsters with a sword in the middle of a deserted replica of Tokyo.

General Terentius preceded him, walking briskly even as he leaned on a cane. He was dressed in armour straight out of a history book, copper breastplate emblazoned with a fearsome face, red epaulettes, a copper helmet with a horse's mane falling from its peak, an embroidered velvet skirt, greaves and covered sandals of white leather.

Darius nodded at the men as he made his way towards the entrance to the tent, and spoke to someone dressed much like the General. "Lucius."

"Yes sir."

"We talked it over. Your unit will be at the axis of the attack against the main gate."

The man, eyes gleaming, saluted with a fist pressed against his heart. "Thank you sir!"

"Thank the General, it's ultimately his decision," said Darius. "I'm just here to explain to the citizens of Essin what to expect if they oppose us."

Men around them snickered.

Terentius had a smile on his face that was almost as nasty. He looked younger today, his eyes shone with tension and anticipation. "I hear those Essinian goat-fuckers have an Imperially trained unit that call themselves a Legion. Lucius, you and I have renounced our heritage, but hearing them say that personally annoys me anyway. Go show them what a real formation is, will you?" Then he laughed, a mighty bellow startling coming from his old frame.

"Keitos, Arsipal-Safa, you'll flank Lucius as we discussed," he continued. "Keitos, make sure you're ready for any outing from their cavalry into Lucius's side."

"Meromeidon, your men are with me and my Hounds," Darius added.

"An honour, my lord," said a burly man with an elaborately curled beard down to his belt. "The fortress won't know what hit them. But you'll be wanting Sezerena for yourself, I warrant."

"Damn right," said Darius with a vicious smile that made the men laugh again. They were putting on the helmets they'd been carrying; younger soldiers behind them hoisted up decorated shields. The atmosphere was electric in a way that made Ryou's nerves prickle with tension.

Darius was nearly at the tent's exit now. He stopped near two men dressed in long robes with only decorative pieces of armour on chest and shoulders. His eyes skipped ahead, rested briefly on Ryou, then his attention was back on them. "Thank you, noble emissaries, for attending us this morning. If Inder has His hand over us, you'll be able to bring back a wreath of victory to your master, King Ka, by late afternoon."
Both men bowed. "It is an inestimable pleasure to have you back, Lord Ghan," said the one in front with a touch of coldness that didn't match his words and elegant gesture. "Not that we'd been warned you were ever gone in the first place."

"And don't you like it better that way?" Darius said dryly. "Think of the report you would have had to write to your master otherwise."

"Your words are rich with wisdom," said the emissary in a tone that Ryou, fine-tuned to all sorts of business discussions rife with subtext, interpreted as 'You're full of it, your men lied to us and hid your disappearance, my report to the king is now going to have to be carefully written to avoid making me look like a gullible idiot, and I am not going to forget that.'

The sharpness of Darius's smile said he was well aware of the undertone himself, and didn't give a damn. He half bowed and moved on, stopping in front of Ryou.

"Thank you for bringing him, Rand," he said to the taller man. "As you might have guessed, I'm going to be busy this morning, Uchee Ryou, but I did want to see you and thank you before you were on your way."

"No thanks are necessary, I was the one who was a burden to you," said Ryou, the civility bred into his bones kicking in automatically.

"Essin is not a place for a civilized man such as yourself." Darius wasn't even looking at him, he was studying the camp outside and the hundreds of soldiers already assembled at the bottom of the hill, gauging their readiness. "I've detached some men to escort you to the capital of Aksum. It's the safest route, according to Rand. From there, King Ka will contact the Per Gathas on my behalf and oversee your journey. If the fortunes of war are with us, Rand and Dionysodoros will be only a day or two behind you. I've tasked them to insure you get back home. Godspeed, Uchee Ryou, in my name and that of King Leyam Sirrian."

Ryou bowed, a curt gesture that should have been a tad lower in deference to the offered protection of a king, but something had stiffened his neck at the words 'in my name'.

When he lifted his head, Darius was out of the tent and facing his troops. Ryou looked at the dark curls caught in the disks. That had been very proper and had avoided any eye contact or messy words; the president would have approved. So did Ryou on second thought. What good would it do to hash it out? What had been done, was done, what had been hidden had been revealed as much as required, and at least Ryou now had safe passage to the Per Gathas guaranteed.

The other leaders had filed out as well. Outside the tent, Terentius was being helped onto a stolid horse by two aides. Once mounted, he drew his short, straight sword and swept it over the assembling troops and towards the city of Essin.

"You all know why we're here!" he shouted, once more startling Ryou with the strength of his voice. Below, the movement of men consolidated into disparate groups. Gleaming legions were already in position at the foot of the hill, standing in rigid square formation and listening stony-faced to their General. On either side, the troops were also in ordered lines, rigid and disciplined enough but their proximity to the General's picked troops made them look a bit slovenly by comparison. Ryou's rough headcount estimated the square formation at eighty men wide and as many deep; it was harder to count the others, especially when the front lines, bearing pikes, went down on one knee so the back lines could see as well, but it looked to be even more than the Legionaries. On the far side of all the tents, yet more soldiers were already marching away in a rectangular pattern, presumably to advance on the city from another angle. To one side, horses were being lined up and mounted; Darius had glanced that way as the General had started speaking.
"For too long has that pissant Sezerena let the Imperials through his border in dribs and drabs, gather on his land and then prance into ours. He's a bleeding traitor and all of Aksum knows it." A ragged noise of assent from the sidelines; the men in square formation said nothing. "But he's a powerful bleeding traitor, untouchable, with friends in high places. Right?"

A few laughs from below, but mainly an anticipatory hush as the General breathed in deeply and shouted: "Unfortunately for him, we don't care!"

The roar shook the earth beneath them. People around Ryou laughed. Terentiius's horse, which must be thoroughly trained, flicked an ear.

"I won't make any long speeches because we all want to be in Essin before too long!" Terentius gestured with his sword again, a conductor modulating the pitch of an orchestra with thousands of instruments. "At every turn, the Imperium and their friends tell us the same thing: we can't form an army without their training, their unity, their god. And what do we do?"

The multi-throated roar was almost impossible to make out, but Ryou gathered that the answer was something like 'We kick their asses!'

"This way," said Rand in Ryou's ear before ducking beneath the tent flaps. Ryou followed him around the back of the tent while all eyes were on Terentius.

"Let's go let these Essinian sores know what the Alliance army is worth!" shouted the General. "Let's show them how much a mix of good steel is better than pure Imperial gold!"

Rand led Ryou to where three men and four horses waited. The soldiers had carefully neutral expressions as Rand looked them over. He had started to give their leader last minute instructions when a sudden clamor made the group turn. The pep talk must be over. After one last shout that rattled the heavens, the men started to stream out of the camp around them. The core of it was the forces Ryou could not help thinking of as the Legion. They marched in the same rigid lines in which they'd stood. The other troops advanced in a different formation, moving with intent on either side of the main strike force with remarkably good coordination for units that did not have radio communication, or even a country and a native tongue in common. Dust was rising from their march, a heavy grey dust torn from the vegetation clinging to the soil, and the ground vibrated faintly beneath Ryou's feet. Other clouds gathered around Essin as other forces moved into position.

Ryou's gaze wandered from the marching troops back towards the command center- and for a moment his stupid, traitorous feelings shook as he saw Darius run towards them. But it wasn't Darius...

He was no longer dressed the same as yesterday, when Ryou had mistaken him for Darius's brother. Today he was wearing the same clothes as the rest of the hounds: black scarf, a hauberk of metal scales, metal greaves and arm protectors. With his hair tied back, the resemblance wasn't as striking as before.

"Sorry for the delay, I was getting the guard ready," he told Rand as he drew near. "Is that enough of an escort? Lord Ghan said-"

"It's fine. Ryou, this is Dionysodoros of Kalicee. He and I will be traveling to Aksum a day behind you to make sure Lord Ghan's will is properly expressed to the Per Gathas."

"Thank you, I'm under your guidance," said Ryou with a bow.

This seemed to surprise Dionysodoros, but then he smiled cheerfully - further dispelling his
resemblance to Darius - and bowed in return, a hand against his heart. "It will be an honor. I wanted to thank you before you left. Lord Ghan told us how you saved his life and helped him get back to us. I would have escorted you personally to Aksum, but with the battle this morning, I'm needed in Lord Ghan's personal guard. If the Fates decree, I will see you in two days time in the capital."

Then he put on his helmet and left at a quick walk in the direction in which resounded crude horn blasts. The camp was emptying at a remarkable rate. Ryou glanced at Rand.

"I will walk you to the outer fortifications," said Rand in response to the unvoiced question. "My presence is not needed until the walls are breached. That won't be until mid-day at best. You and your escort will wait with the rear guard for a few hours. The enemy might attempt a sortie. Once the fighting has gone past the riverbed, they'll lead you to the local border. Last I heard it was still void of a passer, but I haven't had a report yet this morning. That'd see you in Aksum by this evening, and spare you two days of travel and a night on the road."

While Rand was talking, Ryou glanced at his escort. They were trying to keep the neutral look going, but behind it he could see they were disgruntled. They'd wanted to join the battle, it seemed.

Rand picked up the bridle of the extra horse from one of the soldiers and gestured Ryou to follow him. Ryou fell in by his side.

"I apologize for making you ride again so soon after your journey here," said Rand. "And for the haste. Especially as you're injured."

"There's a war going on. I understand," said Ryou.

They were silent for a few paces. Beneath Rand's curtain of sharp bangs, Ryou could feel the taller man studying him.

"Lord Ghan asked me to answer any questions you might have," Rand finally said. "You probably have a few."

"Not really, no," Ryou answered with a faint vindictive feeling.

"...Dionysodoros's appearance seemed to confuse you yesterday," Rand said, apparently fishing for those questions he was supposed to be answering.

Ryou shoved up his glasses. "I take it he's Darius's double. In my country, military and political leaders have also used them in the past."

There was the singular pause of one reorganizing his thoughts. "You're right. Dionysodoros is a Greek refugee who joined Ghan's Hounds, but when we noticed he looked so much like him, we put him on Ghan's personal guard to serve as stand-in should the need arise."

"Convenient. I'm sure it would have caused quite a stir if Darius's disappearance had been known."

"Yes, it would have," Rand conceded.

"Particularly since the Alliance army is here in Aksum with only the faintest nod from its King, to attack someone who has a lot of pull in this country. The campaign has to go as smoothly and quickly as possible, and suddenly losing the Assyrian commander in such a bizarre way would surely throw the whole army into confusion."

Rand snorted, eyes hidden by his bangs as he lowered his head. "Good thing he warned me."
"I beg your pardon?"

"Lord Ghan specifically told me that you would have figured most things out by yourself. He gave me some forewarning so that I wouldn’t listen to my more cautious instincts. They would otherwise bid me wonder how a stranger to our lands could know this much."

Ryou looked at him curiously. "Who are you?"

"Oh," said Rand with a small smile, "so you do have a question."

"You're not a soldier. But..." Ryou stopped himself mid-speculation. Rand had no uniform, true; no title, no full name Ryou had heard of, no pomp or prestige. But he'd been with Terentius yesterday during the strategy meeting, he seemed to be in very close with Darius and men throughout the army leapt to obey his orders without thought or need of explanation. Ryou wasn't sure what all these contradictory facts added up to, except to a man who might not like to be questioned too closely. "I'm sorry, that's not the kind of question you're here to answer, and it's certainly none of my business."

"I thought you might have some questions about Lord Ghan," said Rand, politely sidestepping the whole question about himself.

No, I figured out exactly where the barrier between us is and mapped the distance between us, thought Ryou.

"I understand that, to keep rumours of his reappearance from circulating, he told you as little as he could about himself. What is it that you do know?" Rand asked after a few seconds of a ponderous silence.

"I know he's a lot more than a simple soldier," Ryou muttered.

"Not at all, I believe a simple soldier describes him fairly well," said Rand contemplatively. "General Terentius is the real leader of the Alliance forces. Ghan is good at striking fear into his enemies and firing up the men he's formed into units, but he's always been better at scrimmages and small battle tactics rather than large scale. Did he say anything else?"

Ryou couldn't figure out Rand's angle and didn't much care to guess. "No. He didn't tell me much of a personal nature, just that he's lost both his parents and has a brother."

Rand's step faltered and he looked around suddenly at the soldiers behind them.

"I know he's a lot more than a simple soldier," Ryou muttered.

"Yes. Darius looks up to him a lot. Is he someone awfully important as well?" Ryou wished that unsaid the second it left his mouth. To start with, he'd stubbornly decided that he didn't want to ask Rand any questions. And Yrmah had mentioned Darius's brother in a moment of spite yesterday, so obviously this brother existed and was someone important enough to be known by Darius's enemies. More than the question, Ryou wished the undertone of acerbity taken back. Even if the questions and answers would have been fruitless, a small part of Ryou had still wanted to exchange them with Darius, and maybe find out why it'd been necessary to hide so much from him. He'd expected to have this conversation with Darius, but now he wasn't even sure Darius existed, and he didn't know what to think of Lord Ghan.

"It does seem as if he told you very little," mused Rand.

Yes, thank you for rubbing that in, thought Ryou, not bothering to look up from the sodden, rutted
ground that was trying to strip him of his stolen shoes. They were at the level of the river now, and heading in that direction.

"On the face of it, anyway. Here, we're at the edge of the camp. The rear guard is half a mile away, near the dam. You'll ride from here. Let me help you onto your horse." There was a deep clamour somewhere behind their party, coming from the direction of the city of Essin. With a sense of surrealism, Ryou realized he was a few cannon shots away from a war. Getting out of here now was the best thing that could happen to him. What the hell did Rand mean, 'on the face of it'?

The other soldiers took Rand's words as a signal to leap onto their horses. Ryou couldn't have imitated them at the best of times. He struggled even with Rand's help. While he got into his saddle without too many jolts, his escort rode past him with covert glances of curiosity and a little condescension.

Ryou looked down at the withers of yet another damned horse. His right arm ached. He really hoped he'd be able to sleep in Aksum tonight.

Rand made sure of Ryou's feet in the crude stirrups, handed him the reins and then reached up and tugged on his good forearm to get Ryou to bend down. The man was so tall that Ryou could look Rand in the face even from this height. Rand's eyes behind the sharp dagger of bangs were lined with crow's-feet, he was older than Ryou had initially thought, mid to late thirties. His gaze was hard, direct, and Ryou suddenly remembered how frightening and single-minded this man had been yesterday.

"His brother is my master, King Leyam Sirrianus," Rand said conversationally. "Darius Bher Polenius is the by-blow of King Narseh-Allit, Leyam's father. Though he's not officially part of the royal lineage, Darius has been faithful to his brother through difficult times and is now Leyam's right hand in many matters. I've known them both since they were children, and Darius is very important to both King Leyam and myself. Thank you for bringing him back to us."

Then Rand stepped away, giving the horse a clap on the flank to get it started before Ryou could ask a question, or even close his mouth.
Chapter 19

In the mind's eye, the last hour of the Siege of Essin looked like a Kurosawa's historical movie blended with a Westerner's peplum. Imagination was all Ryou had to rely on. He could hear a deep sustained booming sound that could be felt through the ground; the tromp of feet, the clash of weapons, war cries and screams and possibly cannon fire all so blended by numbers and distance that they formed a homogeneous background noise that sounded like an earthquake. But all this was happening on the other side of the hill on which the forces had been camped; half a kilometer away in a dell near the river, Ryou couldn't even see the city's tallest towers.

The rear guard was composed of a few hundred men watching the dam, presumably to stop the defenders from making a sortie to destroy it and drown the troops invading them over the marshy ground where the forked river had flowed. Riders regularly came and went, stopping near a group of three men with plumed helmets. They didn't spread the information on how the day was going, though, so Ryou and the rest of the infantry were left in ignorance to listen to the noise of battle like continuous rolls of distant thunder.

The sun climbed higher. Ryou had kept Rand's cloak from yesterday and been thankful for it this morning, but now he let it drop off his shoulders onto the ground he was sitting on. His horse, cropping the grass phlegmatically, tried to eat it until Ryou pushed its muzzle away. He and his escort were a little off to one side, away from the river. The rest of the troop was also sitting down in small groups, shields propped against their backs. Only the men on the outer edges kept watch, patrolling. Some of the men laughed and joked, but most of them kept their eyes glued to the thickening palls of smoke on the other side of the hill.

A rider rode over the lip of the dell with a shout. A metallic rustle ran through the assembly as every man looked up and put a hand on their shields, helms or pieces of discarded armour.

The rider galloped up to the commanding officer. The leader of Ryou's little escort, who'd been introduced by Rand as Targuta, was instantly on his feet and then on his horse, trotting towards the officer corps.

As he got there, one of the plumed helmets turned and waved. A ragged cry erupted, men got to their feet, plucked their javelins out of the earth and slung on their shields. Ryou caught many grins of fierce anticipation as the troops streamed past him. Soldiers near the front of the lines shouted instructions which quickly got the men heading towards the hill at a rapid step in a phalanx of twenty men in three rows.

"Well?!" said one of Ryou's escort as their leader returned.

"Lucius got through like a breeze. They say some citizens of Essin helped a maniple over the wall to capture the gates. Did so on the promise that it would be General Terentius who would be in charge of the city's surrender and not Lord Ghan." Targuta was smirking.

His fellow Hound burst out laughing; Ryou had caught his name earlier as Opiashal, a small man with a tonsured head. "As if Lord Ghan cares about those eunuchs! He'll have thundered through their streets before they could finish saying 'mercy', heading straight for the fortress."

"It's given us the day either way," Targuta answered, looking back over the hill with an air of longing. "The citadel will fall now. But they'll be desperate, they'll fight Ghan and Meromeidon every step of the way. Lord of Thunder, how I wish..." He busied himself with the set of his reins without finishing that sentence or looking at Ryou.
"We can be at the border quickly enough if we ride hard," said Opiashal in a hopeful way.

"Rand the Khinite told me the odds of the passer having already returned were worse than tossing dice and getting nine," Targuta replied, a remark that wouldn't have made much sense to Ryou if he hadn't been watching the nearest group of soldiers tossing oblong stones and half-heartedly betting on the outcome for the last hour and change.

"Well-

"And then we have to go to the palace in Aksum. You remember what it was like when we rode that way with Dela the Kush, and getting through those streets during the day."

Opiashal's face fell.

"Anyway, since it sounds like Essin surrendered and we've not been here all that long, the General will put a seal of safety on the city by the time the fortress falls. No loot beyond tribute. And they'll have stashed the women in the temples as soon as the attack started."

"Fuck," muttered Opiashal as he turned to mount his horse.

"Shall we go now?" asked the third soldier who'd been mostly silent up until now. He didn't seem to care about Ryou, the war or the situation either way.

"Yes, let's move. Sezerena's troops won't be making any sorties now, they'll be too busy running from the Hounds." They were treating Ryou like a package, the latter noted. They weren't part of the party that had rescued Darius yesterday, they might not even know Ryou had all that much to do with that, so that just made him the weirdo foreigner whose escort needs had inexplicably dragged them away from a much desired war. Ryou had been a little nonplussed at all this eagerness and frustration; patriotism was all well and good in his modern mind, but not as good as the chance of not getting a limb or a head chopped off. Targuta's mention of loot and women went some way in enlightening him.

He followed his escort as they rounded the hill and headed away from the city, leaving behind them a small group of twenty disgruntled men still guarding the dam. This was it, Ryou realized as they crossed swathes of thoroughly trampled fields; this was the first step on his journey home.

The nervous tension of the men around him all morning had distracted him, but now Ryou's mind broke the muzzle of his self-discipline and started chewing over his memories of the past two weeks. A sterile occupation, but it was that or watch the butt of Opiashal's horse ahead of him.

So the entire town had surrendered at the mere thought of Ghan the Beast rampaging through their streets. Ryou just couldn't square that away with the man he'd traveled with and who'd teased him, listened to Ryou's fairy tales and given him his shoes back in the Broken Lands...Not that these things necessarily matched up. Darius had practically admitted, at different stages in their journey, that Ghan's reputation was exaggerated and useful that way. The citizens of Essin might have surrendered regardless of that incentive. A wind of liberation was blowing through these lands as the Imperium's hold weakened. Smart people would perceive that their ruler was backing the wrong horse and would try to get out of the situation without too much loss.

Hearsay and inflated reputations were not the way to tell how much of 'Ghan the Beast' was fact or fiction, and Ryou did not need such unreliable sources; no, he just needed to remember what happened to Yrmah yesterday. Ryou frowned as he remembered, sudden and jarring, the sight of finger stubs tumbling to the ground and the sound of summer rain...Good god, what had happened to that poor bastard anyway? Ryou's store of sympathy was rather short for the man who would have
killed Darius and undoubtedly Ryou as well, but it was a fact that the prince of Kaides had or was soon going to be tortured for any information he might have, by Darius's orders.

...Ryou was fundamentally honest with himself, because he'd never had the capacity for fuzzy self-delusions. It was the sad, confounding truth that Yrmah's fate wasn't really horrifying him half as much as it should. His ethics were giving a few knee-jerk twitches, but when he thought of Darius, it was that curt dismissal that stuck most in his throat. Ryou had never thought of himself as a bad person before; he'd been a target for bullying for a variety of reasons, from his glasses and reserved nature to his intelligence, wealth and sexual orientation, so if someone had asked him this time last month, he'd have said he was a moral person who felt for those more unfortunate. Right, thought Ryou with an inner snort; I'm such a moral person that Darius chopping off someone's fingers weighs less than the fact he doesn't give a damn about me now that he's safe with his army again. At least I didn't sleep with him or I'd really feel used.

That thought hurt ten times more than it should, a sick sort of wretchedness that felt familiar, if out of place...

"Everything all right, sir?"

Ryou glanced up at Targuta who'd held his horse back a little until he was riding at Ryou's side. "I'm fine."

"We're climbing up to Essin's border," said Targuta, gesturing at the path ahead which had started to slope upwards shortly after leaving Essin's surrounding fields, and which was getting steeper. Essin was situated in a large river valley, with hills rising on either side. The border was automatically nearby, since provincial or country capitals were always built as close as was feasible to their source of international commerce and travel. Zaratusra in his wisdom had placed the Essin border up on a hilly pass at the end of Targuta's pointing finger, and so that was where they were going to go.

"If the passer is back, and if the Paths are favorable, we'll make Aksum city by evening," Targuta added. He seemed to have taken his exclusion from the war with dutiful philosophy and was now making sure the package was alright.

"I see," said Ryou, and since it was well past time he got his head out of its cloud of misery and into constructively planning his return home, he added, "What are we to do in Aksum exactly? Darius mentioned the King would help me deal with the Per Gathas. Do you have some kind of letter of introduction?" Ryou doubted that his business card would do the trick, even though he still had a few along with his wallet tied to his belt in a leather pouch.

Targuta gave him an odd look, and Opiashal, riding point up ahead, glanced back at Ryou with a frown.

"Rand the Khinite gave us a sealed tablet for Mlimar Par Saer, our emissary in Aksum. We're to contact him and wait," said Targuta.

"I see. I'm sorry to be an imposition on you," Ryou added.

This simple phrase, which Ryou would have expected hours ago if the positions were reversed, plunged his small escort into silent confusion.

"Um, that's okay, we have our orders," Targuta finally said.

"I know. Thank you for your protection. I'll be traveling on much further than Aksum, but I think Darius only asked you to-"
"Hey," said Opiashal, twisting around in his saddle. But before he could say more, Tartuga barked "Eyes front!"

"Who's Darius?" asked the third man behind Ryou.

Opiashal had been turning away with a scowl on his face, but that got him twisting around again so fast that Ryou would have fallen if he'd attempted the same manoeuvre. "Don't you start!"

"Shut up, both of you," snapped Targuta.

"Huh?" said the third man.

Ryou glanced at the members of his escort. "Did I say something wrong?"

Targuta's diplomatic hesitation said as much as the set of Opiashal's shoulders up ahead.

"I understand you were the one who warned Dionysodoros and Jexen about Lord Ghan's arrival yesterday. You were traveling together, right?"

"That's right."

"You see, uh..." Targuta seemed to be fishing for a way to say something. "Our commander's name is Lord Ghan."

"I see," said Ryou, drawing his own conclusions from facts and Targuta's constipated attitude.

"He's talking about Lord Ghan?" The third soldier wasn't very quick on the uptake. "Is Darius his name?"

"Shut the fuck up, Cregan," said Opiashal without turning around, his shoulder blades still reading Ryou the riot act.

"Whether it's his name or not is not the point," said Targuta, leaping on the occasion to lecture his underling and thus avoiding having to do so with Ryou directly. Ryou's position in the Assyrian political spectrum must still be a total mystery to these grunts. "He's called Lord Ghan for a good reason and that's the name we fight for."

Because Darius Bher Polenius, with its reminder of illegitimacy and half Roman descent, was probably not good enough for King Leyam's half brother, Ryou surmised. He was a bit annoyed with himself that it'd taken him this long to even wonder why the man he'd known as Darius was going around as Lord Ghan in the first place.

"But is Darius his name?" asked Cregan with the persistence of a mule.

Targuta seemed to be having an internal debate. Finally he nodded shortly. "Yunder was with the search party yesterday, and he asked Dionysodoros afterwards. Dionysodoros was pretty sure that was right, though he wasn't going to swear to it, and he has no business to. There are only two people alive who would use Lord Ghan's name, and that's King Leyam and Rand the Khinite, who's earned that right years ago."

A kernel of silence formed around the party, digesting the fact that Ryou was still alive and well after shouting Darius's real name over half of Essin province. Targuta looked even more constipated and glared at Opiashal up ahead as if this was all his fault.

Clop-clop-clop went their horses' hooves up the paved road, the animals huffing as the ascent got
steeper. The path was well-maintained despite leading straight up into the hills. This was a road of commerce to other countries via the border perched somewhere above their heads. Ryou's mind paralleled their course, rising above the fruitless circling he'd been indulging in. The bit about Leyam had blotted out the rest to start with, but now the whole import of Rand's last words were coming back to him. Darius Bher Polenius...Rand, whoever he was - Ryou still hadn't figured that out - was not the kind of man to say things accidentally. That'd been a lot of information in that parting shot, as if Rand had thought it important that Ryou should know about it even though he was leaving and would never see Darius again. Rand had even given Ryou Darius's name back; his real name, the one even his Hounds did not know. Darius Bher Polenius.

A breeze caressed Ryou's hair... *Just call me Darius...*

Memories, intimate and intense, twisted up in Ryou's chest and fell on him like a blow. No, worse. That was what felt so familiar about this leaden, desperate feeling inside, this near-panic that could go nowhere. It was *The Blow That Hadn't Landed...*

At thirteen, Ryou had been the golden child, the eldest son. He'd never had to struggle to achieve; manners, scholastic merit, discipline, they all came to him naturally. He was the pride of his strict yet esteemed parents, and Ryou had completely taken all of that for granted until he'd fallen in love with the housekeeper's son, a boy two years his senior, and Ryou's father had found out.

The most frightening thing in retrospect was how Ryou had been so single-mindedly infatuated that it never even occurred to him how his parents would react. He and the other boy had kept it a secret because that only made it sweeter, more intense. Adult Ryou could only conclude that the hormones common to that phase of life had driven him temporarily insane. Though it was true he'd still been a child back then, and children do not think much about consequences, or wonder if their parents' love is conditional...

His father had convoked him to his study. President Ujiie Tsukasa had looked at his rows of books on corporate law rather than at his son while he lectured the latter on restraint, responsibility and why someone with Ryou's future would do well to grow up quickly and forget about these childish ventures.

In the midst of mortification and panic, Ryou had felt his heart freeze. "Are- are you asking me to break up with him?"

His father had turned around as if he could not believe his ears. "Are you mad? Of course you're going to break- to cease this puerile distraction of yours."

For the first time - for the last time - in his life, something unexpected had surged through Ryou, and the unmeasured words came out in a rush. "*But I love him!*"

Up to that point his father had registered only mild distaste at his heir going through an adolescent crisis and getting stuck on someone of the same gender vastly beneath him in social status. But at those words, his eyes had gone round, his jaw slack. Ryou had never talked back to him before, much less raised his voice. There could only be one result. His father's hand had whipped up-

...It'd stayed poised there, an aborted gesture that could not measure up to the infraction. Fingers slowly curled into a loose fist as self-control returned. But the look of disillusionment and disgust on his father's face made Ryou stagger back as if the blow had actually landed.

His father had slipped his hand back into the sleeve of his yukata as if he did not want it contaminated. "You-..." he had to take a breath, as well as several steps away. "You. Get out. We will never talk about this again."
They never had.

The other boy had been made to apologize in front of everybody, including his own mother, for his inappropriate behaviour and his bad influence on the son of the household. Ryou had not looked at him, he'd stood staring straight ahead, expressionless. It was the only thing Ryou could do to protect him. His father had been watching, and he could do more than not strike a blow. The housekeeper had had no other choice but to hand in her resignation, but Ryou's mother - who was also Very Disappointed, as his father had made sure he was aware - found her another position. Yet there was always a conditional flavor to the arrangement in Ryou's perception...Tokyo's upper families were closely connected. A rumor here, a word of advice there, a single phone call from Ryou's father, would do it. Ryou had been weak, and now his father was making sure his heir would have the incentive to strip this weakness out. If not, further punishment would be required to teach him the price of failure. Ryou understood this, the logic of it, and he would be damned if the boy and his mother were further harmed as a consequence of his failures; it was much more effective than punishing Ryou himself, and his father knew it. So president Ujiie watched his heir for any sign of a relapse, and Ryou showed nothing. That's where it came from. 'Show them nothing' was only an extension of it. *Show Him nothing*. That's when it'd started.

He'd never seen the other boy again, which was only for the best. He probably hated Ryou, and the only reason he didn't come over and punch him was because Ryou's father would have made sure the housekeeper would never find work again if anything to remind him of this episode ever happened. Ryou had forced himself to move far beyond that childhood stumble lest it trip him up again. It'd sunk so deep into the depths of his mind that to this day he could no longer remember the name of his first crush, or even what the boy looked like...

Damn it, why was he thinking about this now? Ryou removed his glasses and rubbed his face hard with his good hand. His horse chose this moment to shift its shoulders. Ryou nearly dropped his glasses as he made a one-handed grab for the saddle girth to keep from falling. He stuffed his glasses back on and looked around. They were climbing steeply, and the ridge of the pass between two hills was in sight.

"We're here," said Targuta, spurring on his horse to move on ahead past a decorative pillar.

"Is the passer there?" Opiashal shouted after him, but Targuta was too far up ahead to make out his answer.

Fifty meters further up, Ryou, Opiashal and Cregan could examine for themselves a circle of stone similar to the one Ryou had already crossed twice.

"Bugger those Per Gathas cocksuckers," muttered Opiashal.

"No passer?" guessed Ryou.

"No bloody sanctuary, is there," said Opiashal, pulling his horse away.

So the inn indicated the presence of a passer? Ryou's mind went back to the old woman who'd disappeared back in Palis. Because he could manage to feel worse, it seemed.

...That made him think of how Darius had tried to cheer him up after that incident in his own very unique way. Slapping Ryou on the shoulder, increasing the pace to keep their minds off things that could not be changed, but dropping a silver coin they should probably have saved onto a temple altar in passing...

A medley of shouts and cheers shattered Ryou's reflection. He twisted around in his saddle to see his
escort gathered to one side of the hill, looking down at a spot marked by a pall of smoke.

"What's going on?" asked Ryou, pulling his horse around and nudging it in that direction.

The three men were grinning at each other. Targuta graciously turned to share the expression and news with Ryou. "It's the banner, sir! The red banner of the Beast is floating over the citadel."

Ryou passed that through indifferent history lessons and his movie knowledge. "You mean Darius captured the fort already?"

They were so elated they didn't even pick up Ryou's gaffe on the name. "Like an arrow's flight, I tell you, like an arrow's flight," Opiashal was saying, leaning over to slap Cregan on the back. "Nobody stops Lord Ghan. Sezerena's head is on a pike right now or you can have my nuts in a bag."

"Is D- is your leader alright? Can you tell?" asked Ryou.

"What? Oh hell, sir, don't worry about Lord Ghan," Targuta answered. "He's invincible. Best sword in Assyria. Inder himself has His hand over that man's head."

Ryou studied their wide grins. They were completely confident in what they were saying. They really believed Darius was some kind of mythical figure of demigod proportions. Ryou had seen Darius chew on a squirrel when there was nothing else to eat, he'd seen the man covered in mud and sweat, seen him laugh and worry in that somber way of his, he'd held Darius's bleeding body against his own after saving his life; Ryou knew Darius was just a man.

Just call me Darius.

And of course, once Ryou allowed himself to see the whole picture instead of dwelling on the personally painful bits, things suddenly looked quite different. Sure, Darius had told Ryou next to nothing about himself on the face of it, as Rand put it so well. Except for the tidbit of information, right off the bat, that he, Darius, was trouble, and that he didn't want to get Ryou mixed up in it. So he hadn't told him about Ghan or anything, no. But what he had done was share with Ryou his name, his real name which only a handful of people were even familiar with. He'd avoided mentioning his lineage, but he'd talked intimately about his family, his past, about getting Ryou to meet this brother he looked up to...And just before that bloody Yrmah came down on them, Ryou felt pretty sure that Darius had been about to tell him the truth, give him an explanation to all this, and yeah, now that Ryou cast his mind back past the shock of getting shot at with an arrow a few seconds later, he remembered Darius saying that he'd trusted Ryou for a long time now, but that he'd not said anything because he liked...liked what? Liked a friend to see something other than Ghan the Beast's reputation, maybe. Liked to see how he measured up as just a man in Ryou's eyes.

"Oh look, there's Meromeidon's banner. I think it is. Cregan, you've got the sharpest sight, is that the Lion's Head?"

"Yessir, and those are his men, see the way the sun catches their armour? Different than ours."

"But it's Lord Ghan who got Sezerena's head, personally and with pleasure, I warrant."

Darius...

The banner fluttered from the fortification, tiny yet clear in the dry air; the smoke from the burning gate was drifting the other way.

Why couldn't Darius have given Ryou a reason for dismissing him like that...? If Ryou only had a reason- it'd make all these things in his head make sense. It'd join facts like, 'you've known him less
than a month', 'you have nothing in common', 'you've been in danger or in pain or both since you've met him' and 'maybe what you feel for him is just a form of emotional dependency formed under the effects of stress, isolation and the reliance on his protection for survival'. If only he knew what Darius wanted.

If only Ryou knew what he himself wanted. Instead he was way out here sitting on a horse, thinking of the last time he'd felt something this achingly deep inside, back when he and someone he loved were in the same room within touching distance, but not looking at each other as they cut all ties between them and walked away for reasons of duty, family and the safety of the other.

Ryou took a deep breath, pushed up his glasses and made the sudden but necessary decision. "Excuse me," he said to Targuta.

"Hm?"

"Can we go back down?"

"Oh, sorry, sir. We were just- come on, lads, we need to get moving. We have to go to the Anwat border. It'll take us a couple of days. I hope there's some kind of hostel on the road."

"There isn't," said Ryou, who had good cause to know having made the journey the day before yesterday. "But I meant, can we go back down to the Alliance camp? I need to talk to D- to Lord-" oh to hell with it. "I need to talk to Darius."

All three soldiers stopped manoeuvring their mounts around to stare at him.

"Uh, what?" asked Targuta.

"I need to talk to Darius," repeated Ryou, who had the feeling something under considerable pressure was breaking down inside him. Probably his sanity.

"But-" Targuta looked around in the apparent hope common sense could be conjured up from his two colleagues, the captured citadel below, the empty stone circle or his horse. "No, sorry sir. We've been ordered to accompany you to Aksum. Come on, men," he said sharply, as if putting the blame for this random and unreasonable demand on the dawdling of Ryou's escort.

"I understand that, but I really need to go back down. We can go to Aksum afterwards. Probably. I mean-"

Up until now, Ryou had been the package to bring to Aksum, and Targuta had obviously not considered too hard what his orders implied. Ryou could see himself in Targuta's eyes vacillating between the man who'd been rumored to have helped Lord Ghan, and the weird-looking foreigner taking liberties with Lord Ghan's name whom Rand the Khinite had ordered them to escort to King Ka's capital. In short, Targuta was now forced to wonder if those orders meant that Ryou was a V.I.P to be protected, or someone that was being marched to Aksum under guard.

Ryou should have helped sway that verdict in his favor, but his mind was whirling too hard to come up with any persuasive argument. His silence and dead-set expression tipped Targuta's decision, unfortunately.

"Apologies, sir," said Targuta with a curt gesture towards the road leading down the other side of the col, away from Essin and the circle. "We have our orders. You can't see Lord Ghan even if you wanted to, he's in the midst of a battlefield and too busy for details. Stay in Aksum until Rand the Khinite comes, and you can discuss it with him. Sir."
"You don't understand, I need to-"

- to talk to Darius, or Lord Ghan or whatever, and not just to get his version of events. Because whatever had been going through Darius's head this morning, it wasn't the only thing that mattered here. It would influence what Ryou eventually got from him, but it should not influence what Ryou desired in the first place, which was something he'd yet to figure out. Damn it, Ryou had been like this ever since he was thirteen; 'I know I can't have it so it is wiser not to want it'. Now he was going back to that same mold like the obedient office drone he was, and he didn't even know what he wanted. What the hell was he doing here in the first place? What did he want?

He wanted to sit by a campfire and get teased and laugh and hear stories. He wanted to ride through sunshine and through rain with a goal ahead and nothing left behind. He wanted to do something crazy based on instinct and desire rather than duty or logic, he wanted to burn his bridges and smile like he had no regrets.

He wanted Darius back.

If Darius didn't want him around, well then he was going to have to tell Ryou to his face, tell him as Ryou's friend Darius, not as bloody Ghan the Whatever surrounded by a dozen men who knew nothing about the two of them whatsoever.

Targuta had moved his horse forward to Ryou's right side; Opiashal had followed his lead and was boxing Ryou in from the left. Ryou's horse, not the brightest of creatures, took this as an indication that it was time to move on again and followed their lead, docile.

Ryou glanced back, past the soldiers herding him towards the road to distant Anwat and eventually Aksum. The path back to Essin would be patrolled by troops of mounted riders looking for escaped enemy soldiers. That road led to the besieged city behind its high walls, now full of Alliance soldiers possibly still fighting their opponents street by street around the citadel, which was also full of soldiers likely to strike first and ask questions later. In that respect Targuta was perfectly right, Ryou was never going to be able to see Darius that way.

Cregan gave Ryou a warning look and jerked his horse's head to the right to close the gap, ready to leap forward and intercept Ryou should the latter turn and try to bolt. But Ryou was looking beyond him, at the fortress in the distance, the blood red banner floating over it.

Then he looked at the circle of stelae they were skirting.

To him, it was no longer a simple strip of ground with a bunch of upright stones planted around it. Ryou's inner sense was stronger after walking the Paths behind two passers. He could sense it now, this small circle which was a crux of possibilities, constantly shifting and malleable to the human mind. The stream running through the circle was a mighty river of flux in his mind's eye, leading to a multitude of other planes. Not that he needed to leave Aksum at present, no. All Ryou needed to do was to go from here to over there, from this circle of beaten sod to that tower where a blood red banner floated, close enough in the still air where it seemed Ryou could almost lean over and touch it.

He'd just been thinking he wanted to burn his bridges and do something crazy; this undoubtedly counted. But it was that or loose two days going to Aksum, with the risk Rand would not listen anymore than these men, and then where would Ryou and Darius be?

Ryou kicked his horse's flanks and whipped the reins. The animal, the most placid critter in the entire army that Rand must have picked out purposefully for him at Darius's request, snorted in shock and bounced forward, more like a bunny than a steeple-chaser.
Cregan shouted behind Ryou. Opiashal made a flailing grab at Ryou's reins and missed.

Ryou's horse got the picture, sorted out its legs and cantered forward, away from the three escorting soldiers and right at the circle.

"Hey!"

"Oh shit!"

"No! Come back!"

Ryou ignored the dizzy feeling as he passed the border delineated by the stones. He pulled on the left rein, slowing his horse and tugging its head around. The circle was on a slope. The stream came from a natural spring that burbled up just beyond two of the stones and trickled across the empty space. But Ryou didn't want to cross the water. He didn't want to leave this plane, just simply be in another spot of it. In Euclidian geometry - the local geometry of choice, no doubt - the shortest distance between two points was a straight line; in this instance, a straight line only a bird could fly. But that axiom only held true in the three rigid dimensions it was born in; not only were those dimensions influenced by other factors the Greeks could not have known about, but if one went further into abstract geometry and plunged those three dimensions into a higher space, they could be bent like a napkin and then the shortest distance between here and there was really no distance at all.

His unnamed sense stirred. Ryou didn't know how, but he knew he could do this. There was certainly some risk. Quite a lot of it in fact, and Ryou's bypassed common sense was busy calculating it and throwing up all sorts of red flags at each imponderable. But it was possible and that was all that mattered at this point.

Oddly enough, the thought that flashed through Ryou's mind as he kicked his horse into a run was of the president, his father. This, what he was doing here, was what the president had seen in Ryou back then, during that shameful incident. The old man had known somehow that his otherwise disciplined son had this madness deep inside him, that he was capable of doing exactly what he was doing right now (well, not in any detail of course-) It was an oversimplification to say his father felt no affection for Ryou, or that he'd not operated in his son's best interest. He had forced Ryou down the narrowest path and held him on a tight leash because he was - they were both - afraid of what Ryou might do one day if he ever let his feelings take over fully and threw away all that he had accomplished.

Then again, since he was in the Outlands in the first place, hadn't he done that already?

The air around Ryou changed and his horse's hooves no longer touched ground.
Chapter 20

In the split second during which reality vanished and then reappeared, Ryou remembered the Honda falling a considerable distance through the air last time he'd tried to move through space by cheating his way past the usual three dimensions. And horses did not come equipped with airbags. Oh shit-

His horse screamed in panic- but its hooves hit solid surface an instant later. The animal skidded and slid to its rump, legs splaying out until it was almost flat on the ground, at which point Ryou lost whatever support his stirrups gave him and tumbled off.

He picked himself up dazedly. Nothing broken this time, though his left side was now as bruised as his right. He instinctively felt for his glasses and felt a little more centered when he found them to be still on his nose.

The surface onto which he'd fallen then took up all of Ryou's attention. Tiles. He and his horse had skidded over tiles. They were cool beneath his fingers, a beautiful deep blue with black edges in a honeycomb pattern. Ryou stared at them, frowning. The tiles were trying to tell him something, something important-

He was in a building, in a long, large corridor. And though he could not see it, his unnamed sense told him that he was at the top of a tall structure and that on the roof right above his head floated a red banner. He'd done it. He'd actually done it. Ryou took a deep, shaky breath of relief and looked around.

His horse had fetched up against a wall a few meters away from a double wooden door decorated and reinforced with wrought iron. They were thrown open, a dead body serving as a door wedge for the left hand door. Ryou tore his gaze away from the curlicues of blood marring the blue of the tiles to concentrate on the picture framed by the doorway. Four armed men were staring back at him as if he was the most extraordinary thing they'd ever seen, while behind them stood Darius, looking at Ryou as if he'd expected this all along.

While all the humans stood about in silence, Ryou's horse got to its feet, its hooves making a jarringly out-of-place clippety clop sound against the tiles.

"Hold it," ordered Darius. "I'll deal with this. All of you, leave."

"Wha-aat!" the soldier shouted, astonishment temporarily robbing him of respect for his superior office. "But- but sir, he-"

"Out. And take this with you."

The subordinate's jaw moved helplessly, then he gave Ryou one last bewildered, fearful glare and went to get 'this' from where it lay right next to Darius. He grabbed one heel, one of his companions grabbed the other, and they dragged the body out, leaving a smear of blood on the tiles and rugs. Ryou, who'd gotten to his feet along with his horse, glanced briefly at the body as it passed by; an Aksumite man in his late forties, face frozen in a death rictus beneath the thin golden circlet around his brow. He was dressed in a toga and gold-edged tunic, but no armor or weapons. Sezerena in all likelihood, and it seemed he had not even tried to defend himself once his city and guards had fallen.
Ryou couldn't find it in himself to wonder why.

The last two men took care of the other bodies: a man Sezerena's age in decorated armor and the guard who'd died by the door. Darius waited in silence. His gaze did not waver from Ryou. He looked much like he had when Ryou had last seen him, which was only three hours ago even if it felt like longer. His sword was drawn, the edge a mess of blood, fibers and other unidentifiable particles. There was a splash of blood on his left side, black against the red of his armor. His jaw was clenched as he stared unblinking at Ryou. The latter wasn't sure what that expression meant.

A clatter in the stairwell made Ryou look around. Half a dozen Hounds rushed up the steps with weapons drawn, alerted by the sound of Ryou's horse. The one in the lead took one look at Ryou and stopped so abruptly that one of his friends barreled into him and then staggered back swearing. The first soldier whipped off his helmet to get an unimpeded wide-eyed view of Ryou, at which point Ryou recognized him as Dionysodoros. The Greek soldier stared at Ryou for three long seconds, then he took in the rest of the scene, the corpses being hauled out and the look on Darius's face. He promptly turned and started to do crowd control, shooing all but two other Hounds back down the stairs.

The man who'd objected to Darius's order earlier, an Alliance officer by the looks of his decorated breastplate, gave his hold on Sezerena's ankle to one of the Hounds and then he marched back to the end room with a deeply suspicious look on his face.

"Bahador," said Darius without looking his way, "make sure Rand gets the body. He'll know what to do. Dionysodoros, set a guard on the stairs up to here. I'm not to be disturbed." Then he lifted one hand and crooked the fingers at Ryou in a short beckoning gesture.

Bahador had a lengthy objection scrawled all over his face, but Dionysodoros and the other Hounds had moved instantly to obey and that left him alone in the hallway with his unspoken apprehensions, the source of which was looking right at him. In the end he bowed curtly and left, passing Ryou as the latter stepped through the door frame, avoiding the trickles of blood.

The room Ryou entered was large, the width of this end of the citadel's rectangular tower. Unglazed windows pierced three of its sides, with tapestries hanging from poles to act as sliding curtains. Decorated wooden slats leaned against the wall next to each, ready for servants to board them up in case of rain or wind or the owner's whimsy.

Darius stood near a large marble desk full of papers and now liberally splattered with blood. His metal helm was perched on top of a bunch of leather-bound books, scarring the covers. Two thirds of the room had been a study, a library and place to lounge on couches and eat. To one side stood the bedroom portion of the room, separated from the rest by a wooden partition heavily pierced with fretwork. Several panels had been knocked down. From the pool of blood beneath them, that was where the second man in Sezerena's room had died. The bed, draped with a rich green coverlet, was on a platform with rugs and skins spread all around it. The walls were covered in symbols, geometrical patterns and figures done in earthy, vibrant colors, highlighted by draperies, statuaries and shelves with various weapons and precious objects. The room was large enough where the effect was resplendent rather than cluttered. It was a light year away from anything Ryou had seen so far in the Outlands, the diametrical opposite of the crude dwellings in tiny farmland villages. The air, redolent with the scent of incense, now mostly smelled of smoke wafting in from outside. And blood, of course, that meaty, copper tang of blood and bodies that Ryou had been blissfully ignorant of this time last month.

Ryou didn't give his surroundings more than a cursory glance, despite all the things that could catch the eye, before he brought his focus back on Darius who had yet to move or say anything to him.
When their gazes met again, Darius spoke.

"You came back."

"Yes. I-..." Ryou fished for words to explain his behavior that didn't sound like something out of a teen romance. It was embarrassing and more to the point, the triteness of it could not explain the abysmal insanity that was moving him right now. "You didn't actually ask me if I wanted to leave this morning. I don't, I want to stay. We've been through a lot together-" but that didn't have any bearing on his decision. Ryou mentally stumbled as arguments, counterarguments and burnt bridges rushed through his mind, but he caught himself and faced without flinching this man who'd brought him here. "Forget it. I'm here now, so it's your move. If you want me to go away, then look me in the eye and tell me so."

"I thought dismissing you in public earlier and then having you escorted to the nearest border under guard was pretty much the same thing." But Darius was still looking straight at him unlike this morning, and that intense stare told Ryou that no, it was not the same thing.

"Do you want me to leave?" Ryou challenged.

Darius snorted. "Don't play coy, Ryou, you're not some simpering eunuch. You know damn well what I want by now. If you expect me to court you like a fucking Ionian, you're going to be disappointed."

Ryou felt suddenly breathless as his view of this conversation shifted. It was as if he'd thought he had a tall mountain ahead of him to climb, only to glance down and see clouds beneath him. He'd been wondering all morning how much Darius's occasional come-ons had been lies to manipulate him and how much had been teasing. Looks like it'd been neither. It was obvious Darius teased him because he liked to get under Ryou's skin, but beneath that he'd been perfectly serious about both his desires as well as the reason for not acting upon them, and he'd expected Ryou to understand that. Ryou was just not used to anyone being quite that upfront and casual about men sleeping together. The cultural gap had caused him to misread the situation, along with all those other reasons that'd been circling around his head this morning, trying to convince him that, beyond a little impersonal lust, there was nothing between two strangers from different worlds who could barely understand each other and who'd only known each other a short, dangerous, painful time.

In the same way the dimensions had opened before him - beyond description and comprehension, yet understood anyway - Ryou felt a rush. Ever since he was thirteen and let reason guide his behavior when it came to love, he had never been able to touch that pulsing, fragile, indomitable feeling again. Now he remembered why. Love was a territory where reason did not dwell and would not allow one to reach.

"I don't want you to court me," he said, and was mildly pleased when that came out in a steady voice as straightforward as Darius's.

"That's good, but you're going to be disappointed anyway." Darius moved towards Ryou slowly, propping his bloodied sword in passing against the arm of a low chair. "Other men and women have tried to advance their status by bedding Ghan the Beast, Uchee Ryou, and better men than you have tried to tame me."

"I am not trying to-" 

"You saw what I did to Sezerena?" asked Darius, interrupting Ryou's cutting objection.

"It'd have been hard to miss," Ryou said sourly, once more noting in passing his moral degeneration.
Darius jabbed a finger at a red curtain lined with beadwork, half torn from a rod, which was to one side of the entrance, a side passage paralleling the corridor and leading to the room before this one. "His women are next door, as dead as he is."

That did give Ryou a jolt. "They killed themselves?" he asked, giving the side door an upset look despite himself.

Darius's slow advance hit a pause. "How did you...you think I'm incapable of slitting the bellies of a couple of dumb ewes?"

Ryou forced himself to look away from the red curtain. "Well I don't think you'd do it personally, no, since you told me back when I got you out of the hospital in Tokyo that you don't strike women."

"You-..." Darius pressed his lips together and then he growled, "Didn't anything else I say about myself get through your head? Or are you only going to remember the few good points I mentioned?"

"That's not exactly what I'd call 'good', Darius, and no, I remember everything equally, the good and the bad, that's my nature," Ryou answered, nettled. "But in my country, back when we fought feudal wars, Sezerena's concubines would have stabbed themselves as a matter of course rather than be taken alive, so I didn't really think about your involvement one way or another."

Darius stared at him as if weighing that. "It looks like they went traditional and took poison, which is a little less messy," he finally said. "But they wouldn't have done it if Terentius was taking the citadel. They did it because they feared what Ghan the Beast would do to them."

"The effects of that reputation you mentioned a few days ago," Ryou said caustically, "the one you told me was overrated but useful for scaring your enemies into submission."

Darius gave him the usual irritated look when Ryou remembered something Darius had forgotten he'd mentioned. Then he crossed the distance between them in five swift strides. Before he could even blink, Ryou found himself caught against the opened door, his wrists pinned back against the decorated wood at shoulder height.

"What I am saying, you stubborn gods-blinded fool, is that you have no idea who I am. Haven't you figured that out by now? I would think-"

"Why, are you a liar?"

"The amount of things you failed to tell me is pretty abysmal, Darius," Ryou said and felt a little vindictive satisfaction when the steely gaze that'd never shown fear or remorse before twitched away from his for a moment. "But even if I've only known you for a few weeks, I can tell you weren't putting on an act all that time, if at all. You told me yourself that you don't dissemble, and I don't think you do, I think you're damned proud of being open, direct and blunt to the point of callousness. It'd have been easier for you to lie during our voyage, make up a fake name and some harmless history about yourself and leave it at that, but you didn't. The few personal things you did tell me were the truth. I do have an idea of who you are. What I've known of you these past weeks was your good side-"

"I-"

"-and your bad side is what you've been showing me since yesterday in spades, and maybe I still don't know- Ow- Ah, Darius, stop! That's my broken-"
Darius let abruptly go of the wrists he'd been gripping. Ryou cradled his broken forearm to his chest and tried to get his breath back. The limb had been no more than sore all morning - for reasons that might or might not be related to the intervention of the goddess of good health - but the sharp searing pain when Darius's fingers had angrily tightened had reminded Ryou that he did have a fairly serious injury he should be treating with care.

"Ryou," said Darius in the warning tone of one struggling for self-control, "it was a short battle but I've been killing half the morning and my blood is high. Don't provoke me."

Ryou moved the wrist gingerly and didn't bother to comment on that.

"Look at you," Darius sneered, gesturing at Ryou's arm as if this was just one more proof of Ryou's voluntary blindness. "You told me about your life back there. You're a peaceful man with a family to return to, and since following me you've been injured multiple times and nearly killed. You're smart enough to have figured out by now the kind of enemies you'd make by my side. How can you consider staying here and risking more?"

Ryou straightened and pushed up his glasses. "I'll try to avoid getting anything broken in the future."

Darius looked like he didn't know quite what to do with that answer, so he just glared.

"It's true I don't know...I don't know all that much about you, anymore than you know all that much about me. Maybe there can't be anything more between us." Because there might be too much of Ghan the Beast in this man, which would eventually kill the feelings Ryou had developed for Darius. That was Reason voicing its opinion again, and Ryou might have slipped out of under Reason's thumb for now, but he was still going to listen to it and see things without self-delusions. "But in the name of what there is, don't just chase me away if you're only doing this for my own benefit. If I'm wrong and you don't want me here, just tell me so instead of putting on this- this display of your less loveable qualities." Darius's eyes went wide as if he couldn't quite believe he'd just heard that. "I'll go if you tell me to and why. What the hell would I do otherwise, camp outside your tent until you change your mind? That'd be ridiculous. I am just not going to leave without setting the record straight between us. I don't want regrets. Not this kind."

Darius's nostrils flared. "You make it sound all very reasonable."

"Trust me, reasonable is the last thing I'm being right now," Ryou muttered.

Someone was shouting one floor down, it sounded like orders though Ryou couldn't make them out. In the top tower everything was silent. Darius was glaring at a corner of the room as if the statue of a plump woman holding a deer had offended him. But as Ryou watched the face that'd become so familiar, the emotions shifted, changed. Darius glanced up at the ceiling, apparently having a brief, personal conversation with whatever gods had put him in this present situation, and then his focus was on Ryou again.

"And tell me, Inlander: if it turns out that you are a fool and I am a liar, and that there's nothing here but the beast they all talk about, what will you do?"

That sounded dire, but it wasn't a threat. It was a blunt question and a bit of a challenge, and it harked back to the clashes of will they'd been having since the moment they met, part of what had drawn them together across the amazing distance of cultures and backgrounds that separated them...

"I'd leave," Ryou replied without hesitation, because it was the truth and also what Darius wanted to hear.
"That's what I'm talking about," said Darius, moving closer, placing his hands slowly, deliberately on either side of Ryou's head and boxing him against the open door once more. "Maybe I won't let you leave even if you want to."

"I don't think you're that kind of man."

"And if you're wrong and I am?"

"Did you see how I got here?" Ryou shot back, looking Darius right in the eye.

A moment of sizzling silence and then Darius's lips twitched up in a smile he was obviously trying to fight, however unsuccessfully. "I do remember how you got here and I'm going to be very angry about it later, but right now, I have to ask: you took that insane gamble with your life just to come back here and ask this bastard half-Roman soldier if I want you to leave?"

"I-"

"You can't possibly think I'll say 'yes' and let a man like you walk away from me twice," said Darius and then his mouth crushed Ryou's hard enough to knock his head back into the door.

After a motionless moment of surprise, Ryou squirmed his left arm out from where it was pinned between Darius and the door to loop it around the armored shoulders and instinctively pull the other man closer still. The scales of the lamellar got pressed between them, hard and sharp, but Ryou didn't care because Darius's lips had parted in a silent 'hah' that caressed Ryou's mouth and made his body pulse beneath the pressure. Ryou's fingers clinked against the disks tied in Darius's hair and tangled in the rough curls. Darius was now applying that rough kiss to Ryou's jaw and neck, a haste and loss of control that shook Ryou through and through. He gripped harder, a huge, hot feeling expanding in his chest, trickling down the roughed-up skin, pooling in his stomach and slithering lower.

Darius's hand dropped without hesitation to Ryou's crotch and Ryou flinched at the hard squeeze and the explosion of sensation and lust that nearly blew him off his feet.

"Looks like you don't need courting at that," Darius said with a near-silent laugh that tickled Ryou's ear. "That's good, I'm terrible at it. Come on, we don't have much time."

Ryou went huh-uh or some other sound of non-objection, though Darius's words could have been in their original ancient Assyrian for all he'd really paid them any attention. His hips were pressing lewdly forward into Darius's hand. It'd been a few months since his last trip to Shore, while Darius's presence these days, his heat, his scent, the touch of his skin when he handed Ryou the reins or joined him naked beneath the blanket at night, had been a growing frustration that Ryou was only now starting to fully measure.

He clung to Darius when the latter moved away from the door. Darius curled his arm around Ryou and led him across the room, simply lifting him up over the fallen wooden partition without breaking stride or letting more than half a dozen undesired centimeters between their bodies.

Ryou's thighs hit wood and he was flat on his back on the soft mattress before he could gasp for air. Darius hooked an arm beneath Ryou's legs and shoved him further as if he were as light as a pillow.

"Whu-" Ryou bit his lip accidentally as Darius slipped his hands beneath Ryou's linen shirt and lifted it off of him in one rough movement. Seams cracked as Ryou found his head and hands caught in rough cloth. Darius gave an impatient jerk. Ryou twisted to free himself and with one last wrench the shirt came off.

Ryou winced. His glasses had tumbled onto the bed, and the bindings over his right arm had been
jerked loose and were now unraveling near his head.

Darius made a low noise in his throat, a sound of satisfaction and hunger as his eyes fastened on Ryou's bare chest. He shoved Ryou further up onto the mattress, a knee landing between Ryou's spread legs with a thump that jarred the heavy bed, and then his hands ran down Ryou's body in a quick preliminary appreciation before jumping straight to Ryou's belt.

Ryou gasped, a deep intake of startled air resembling a yelp. "Wait- you want to- you want to have sex now?!"

"Hell yes," came the snorted response, Darius's concentration on what his fingers were doing. "Do you know how many days I've desired this?"

"But- but now?!"

"Especially now," said Darius, lifting his head and giving Ryou a smile that was dangerously feral. "Gentle magian, that's what the shedding of blood does to one of Inder's sons. You really think you're up to the truth that is Ghan the Beast, Ryou? Before you showed up, I was going to find one of Sezerena's catamites who hadn't done himself in and would be looking for protection from the garrison, and then I was going to push him down on the nearest surface and pretend it was you."

Ryou gaped. Then he reached up and punched Darius on the shoulder. The gesture had more impact than the blow through the armor. Darius gave Ryou's fist a scowl.

"That is barbaric and it doesn't impress me, Darius."

"No, it takes a lot more than that to impress you," Darius whispered and pulled him up with a jerk into a seated position to kiss him hard. Ryou was helpless, Darius's hand gripping the back of his skull, the other pressing him against the metal scales of the armor. Ryou clung on to what he could, his injured arm around Darius's shoulder and the other hand catching a leather strap holding the upper armor in place.

"That was truly what I was going to do, though," Darius added as an afterthought in the crook of Ryou's neck.

"I guess it's a good thing I came back then," Ryou muttered, defeated by his own lust as much as by the intuition that it'd take a stick of dynamite to derail Darius now. As for what Ryou thought of Darius's bright plan...god help him, even as he recoiled at the implications, a breathless, sordid corner of his soul had shivered under a pulse of lust at the words 'pretend it was you'. At this point, was Ryou still counting the number of things he had to bury along with his ethics and his prim and rigid personal standards anymore? One day there was going to be a reckoning, but it was not today, and so Ryou was going to take all that this day had to offer and more. It was part of his brand new off-the-cuff philosophy of burnt bridges and radical insanity.

His back was being ground into the mattress again as they both sunk down once more. Ryou got his hands on his trousers and beneath Darius's fingers before they hurt him; Darius was as rough as Ryou's hidden fantasies had guessed he would be. And Ryou ached for it. Still high on the rush of madness that'd brought him here, it buried like an avalanche all the reasons to wait for a better time and more emotional commitment. It even carried off Ryou's worries about being on the bottom for the first time in his life, as well as his long-standing rule to never have sex without a condom involved (though this latter concession was due to evident practical reasons as well as lust-induced madness).

Darius leaned back, glanced down at Ryou's hands with an expression that sent heat searing through
Ryou's entire body. "Take those clothes off," he instructed, pushing himself away from the bed and turning away.

Ryou really did need to get out of these breeches. The cords holding the front shut were digging into his erection to a painful degree. He had to toe off his shoes, then struggle with woolen material to free his legs one-handed.

Darius was back before Ryou was finished. He got rid of the breeches still clinging to one of Ryou's legs with a brusque gesture, shoved Ryou back against the finely woven blanket, and dumped the contents of a cylindrical flask right over Ryou's legs and crotch.

"Hey!" Ryou sat up with a gasp. Oily liquid ran down his thighs with a smell like roses and pungent olives, making a mess on the blanket. Darius pushed Ryou down again, this time deliberately with a provocative smirk, and he held Ryou down by that single hand on his shoulder while brown eyes raked Ryou's body up and down.

"-waiting for this," was the half-shaped whisper that slipped out of his mouth.

Ryou's hands hovered near Darius's chest. He was used to getting his partners naked rather than the other way around. Though Darius would never accept a passive role - the mind balked at the thought - nothing in his attitude suggested he'd mind if Ryou took a few matters into his own hands. But Ryou's intentions were being defeated by the armor. How the hell was this going to come off?

"Straps on the side," said Darius, guessing his thoughts; he was already jerking at them, his eyes never stopping their detailed examination of Ryou's body.

That was a start. Ryou fumbled and pulled at the buckle near Darius's left hip while Darius got the one at the shoulder, shoving his hand beneath the armor covering his upper body from throat to chest.

Darius pulled the lamellar open with an impatient gesture. Underneath he wore a short tunic and a skirt of linen cloth folded so many times it was several centimeters thick, held in place by a wide belt high up the waist. Darius tugged the belt buckles and let the whole thing fall past the metal leg-guards protecting his shins. In the meantime, Ryou's fingers touched the upper body armor, attached by leather knots to the lamellar at the shoulder and down the back, and wondered how the rest was going to come off.

The next instant, Darius's weight was crushing him down again and Ryou realized that the armor wasn't coming off at all.

The open lamellar was poking Ryou's sides with its metal disks, the upper armor jabbed him in the chest. The solid feel of Darius's body on his own was making Ryou's blood throb. A part of him had been waiting for this too- waitingsolong-

Darius moved his body against Ryou's as if he wanted to get as much of that contact as possible. His mouth searched blindly up Ryou's collar bone and throat. Ryou shuddered. He grasped Darius by the shoulders, gripping the strong neck beneath wild locks clinking with disks. Darius propped himself up on one elbow to take some of his weight away, and his free hand traced Ryou's body, his ribs, his hip, ending in a heavy caress kneading Ryou's thighs. Ryou's skin was a rush of sensation; the solid weight, the small titillating scratches along his ribs and legs from the armor's scales, the rasp of the linen tunic against his chest, the heady touch of bare skin on skin, and the hardness of Darius's sex against his own.

Darius lifted his head. His expression was intense, concentrating everything on Ryou and on this
moment. "You're older, wiser - a well-bred better man than me altogether - but right now I really don't care. Do you?"

Ryou didn't know why Darius was mentioning his age, much less Ryou's wisdom which had currently devolved to a state where the only answer it could come up with in response to Darius's incomprehensible question was "Huh?"

"That's what I thought. I'll take the lead, then," said Darius, voice low and rough. It sent waves of lust running over Ryou's skin. He nodded without even knowing or caring what he was agreeing to, and Darius's hand reached between them. The bracer on his arm scraped against Ryou's lower rib, but Ryou forgot the graze when fingers slicked with oil closed on his erection.

Pleasure rang through Ryou's body like a shot. He stiffened and snatched away the hand gripping Darius's shoulders to muffle the sound that tried to escape from his mouth. He wasn't- he didn't usually- he was always the one in control- and the bloody door was open!

The fingers stopped their winding trip from balls to tip and back again. They left his erection all together and reached up to where Ryou was blinking in dismay at the cessation. Darius caught Ryou's hand - gently, since it was the injured one - and, with a small tsk-tsk-tsk, pulled it away from Ryou's mouth. Ryou's gaze flickered to Darius's face and the teasing lopsided curve of his lips. Darius caught his gaze and shook his head as he let go of Ryou's wrist.

Ryou's fingers, left to their own devices, trailed down his cheek as if his fingertips could reassure him he was not blushing as furiously as he was inwardly...but he didn't attempt to cover his mouth and face with his hand again, and Darius's fingers returned to their initial task. His face was so close; a flush darkened the bronze of his cheeks, eyes intent as when he fired his bow, focusing on what his fingers were doing to Ryou- it was too tempting, Ryou couldn't close his eyes on the sight, but he was too enslaved to habits of reserve and modesty to keep them fully open either. His eyelids fluttered as desire crawled up and down his skin...Darius allowed him this small concession, or maybe he hadn't noticed. Ryou could feel his dick rubbing against Darius's in the loose grip of those strong fingers. Flashes of Darius's face caught through a veil of eyelashes; his mouth was open, teeth catching the lower lip briefly as he pressed into Ryou, quick hard gestures like a reflex grab at a sudden jab of pleasure- Ryou managed not to make a sound, but he was sure breathing noisily.

Darius shifted, putting a few inches of cold air between their bodies, a growing purpose and urgency to his movements. His fingers stopped tempting and teasing, and closed on Ryou's erection with an obvious goal in mind. The left hand Ryou still had on Darius's shoulder convulsed into a death grip on one of the plates covering the upper body, rough leather beneath his fingertips another sensation in the deluge. Two weeks - more than that - a flash of Darius pulling his sword from the Rajin - smilling in that fashion - Darius bathing in the river, the water running down his back- ah!

One knee between Ryou's legs to bear his weight, one hand still destroying Ryou's restraint, Darius moved his other arm, pivoting from the elbow planted deep in the mattress near Ryou's head to shove away the hand that had instinctively gone over Ryou's mouth again to catch that cry. Ryou blinked away the moisture that'd gathered when he'd screwed his eyes shut too hard, and obediently let his arm drop down to the coverlet again. Darius's hand stayed where it was, a callused thumb brushing Ryou's lips and then pushing them apart, a rough, sensual gesture. A finger followed. Ryou shuddered and his tongue licked at the taste of Darius's skin. Darius's breath, heavy and curling up into an unvoiced 'hah', brushed Ryou's cheek.

Lust was thrumming along every one of Ryou's nerves, pulling his legs apart by primal instinct from where Darius's erection was thrusting into him. It was the most natural thing in the world, it was the only thing in the world. The feeling of that hardness sliding against his skin and digging into the
achingly sensitive spot behind his testes-

Darius moved abruptly, rolling to cover Ryou fully again. His weight and strength held Ryou down, armor poking him in various places. He gripped Ryou's legs and shoved them together with one undeniable push. Ryou blinked. Hands were holding his legs down now, bearing most of Darius's weight. Ryou shuddered with arousal, feeling Darius shove into the crook of his thighs, thrusting hard, so hard it had to be almost painful. Ryou's mouth opened in a soundless moan, control slipping.

"Wanted to see you like this-" Darius said, words slipping out between heavy gasps and rolling over Ryou's skin. "See that golden mask come off, come off for me."

The pressure building in Ryou skyrocketed, and suddenly nothing mattered anymore except obeying that basic primal urge. His left hand fought its way through folds of cloth and metal - got nowhere, and in the meantime the brush of Darius's abs against his erection was going to drive him insane. He squirmed, a strangled groan parting his lips. Darius glanced down, then shifted and one hand stopped crushing the skin of Ryou's thigh and grasped Ryou's dick instead.

Ryou's breath stuttered. He couldn't look away from Darius now, face so close, the eyes fixed on Ryou's expression, the serious set of Darius's lips- they parted with a short exclamation as he found the rhythm they both needed, nothing fancy, just thrusting into thighs and hand, primitive needy lust-

- tripped the fuse and Ryou's back arched and vision whited out as the pleasure - finally! - released and flooded him.

He was too pinned down to properly shove into Darius’s hand, but Darius, watching his face, knew; knew to move his fingers in those deeplonggood gestures that spilled the pleasure out, adding the gooey slick of semen to the contact between their bodies and leaving Ryou a boneless, breathless mess on the bed.

Darius let go of Ryou's fading erection to grip him by the shoulders and used his whole body to thrust- once- twice-...A ragged 'uhn' stirred the hair over Ryou's ear. Ryou gripped the man in his arms as well he could with his injury and the armor and all the rest of the details. Warmth was seeping through his body, following the fading waves of pleasure.

Ryou, panting, stared up at the ceiling painted with complex geometric patterns he was only now noticing. That couldn't have lasted more than ten minutes. The intensity, however...no complaints there. Maybe it was more exact to say it'd lasted nearly three weeks, ever since he'd held this man, strong, solid, so vibrantly alive (though also heavily bleeding at the time) in his arms on the front seat of the junked Nissan. That was quite long enough to hold in an orgasm.

Darius blew out his breath in a satisfied way and propped himself up on one elbow to gaze down at Ryou. Ryou looked back with none of the distance and discomfort that'd stained the afterglow of many past encounters. With Darius looking down at him, a contented half smile on his face, and with Ryou's sense of restraint still mostly missing in action, there really didn't seem to be anything other to do than wrap his arm around Darius's shoulder and pull him down for a kiss. Darius's hand, gentle now that the urgency was spent, settled on Ryou's bare hip. Ryou tilted his head against the coverlet and coaxed apart the lips meeting his. From Darius's response, he wasn't used to doing this, but neither did he seem surprised or turned off...Ryou's erection was spent, but prickles of lust still ran up and down his skin as the kiss deepened, explored...

"Wait-" Darius gasped, breaking away. "Wait. I do have an army waiting for me downstairs," he added with a quirky upturn of the lips. "Terentius is an old fox. Our respective ranks are too uncertain to have him pull orders on me, but if I piss him off too much he'll be sure to tell my brother I ditched him to go screw my lover instead of properly securing Essin, and then Leyam will have my
balls cut into squares and play dice with them."

That brought reality back at a gallop.

"...That's right, your brother. Rand told me."

"Yes, Leyam, my king and master," said Darius, brushing a finger over Ryou's lips.

Ryou didn't know what was going through Darius's head right now. Ryou for his part was once again staring at a deep gap between them, a world of unknowns.

With the sigh of a soldier pulled away from warmth and comfort to do his duty, Darius pushed himself up and got to his feet. Ryuou sat up as well, absently cradling his right arm. It was all very well to talk about having no regrets; saying so didn't make it so. Not that Ryou had any regrets at coming back and laying his heart bare and having amazing sex, no. Ryou didn't have any regrets at all (yet) but he certainly had a growing list of things to worry about. His previously sacrosanct sense of reason was keeping a meticulous tally. So many unknowns, so many worlds between them, so many ties that Ryou could barely see anchoring Darius to these primitive countries, while Ryou only had this one intangible feeling gripping his chest, hurting him whenever he thought that he might have ridden off to Aksum like a self-disciplined idiot and never seen Darius again...Indefinable but undeniable feeling that swelled and blew away old repressions, and warmed him all over as he watched his new lover, totally unabashed, wipe off his lower body with a corner of the protective skirt he'd worn before. Darius tossed it back to the floor with a contented smirk, then he quickly and a little haphazardly did up the lamellar again, a gesture of unstudied ease and grace in Ryou's eyes. Ryou's sense of reason was still there and doing its job - it was too ingrained in Ryou to ever discard - but beneath it, Ryou's feelings had fully slipped their leash and were running wild. He'd not felt this terrified and euphoric since puberty.

Darius scrubbed his hands covered in oil and semen on a corner of Sezerena's blanket, then he moved his armor around with a contented roll of the shoulders, leaned forward and lifted Ryou's right arm by the wrist and elbow. He removed the bindings gently and examined the arm. "Hmm, it'll be okay. Still needs a few days in a splint, and a twelveday before you can use it."

Ryou looked down at the swollen, bruised limb. It looked pretty bad actually, but considering he'd fractured it yesterday - good god, only yesterday - it was almost miraculous that it wasn't a whole lot worse. There was nowhere in Ryou’s world of abstract geometry and dimensional physics where he could fit in healing prayer, so he decided piecemeal that he was going to just put this down to the fact that it seemed he healed quickly, and leave it at that. He had enough to concentrate on these days.

Darius wrapped the linen back around the splints again while Ryou's mind went hiking over the last twenty four crazy hours. Ryou didn't pay attention until Darius tightened something around the arm and over the linen bandages with a metallic clink. Ryou looked down and saw Darius strapping his right bracer onto Ryou's forearm.

"What are you-"

"Is that too tight?" Darius asked, slipping a finger beneath the leather cord zigzagging back and forth across the linen wrapped over the ulna. "This will help. The sigils on the metal will take the place of the ones that were painted on the wrappings."

"I could have gone back to the priests of Hygiea."

"They'll be busy," said Darius. Then Ryou found himself pinned by a hard look. "Wear this, Uchee Ryou. Wear this until you decide it's finally time for you to go home. Until then, this crest means that..."
you are under my protection, and not a man in this army will dare lift a finger to harm you."

Ryou stared at him, speechless.

"My enemies will treat it like the fabled beacon of Alexandria," Darius added dryly, dropping Ryou's wrist to turn and head towards where he'd left his sword, "but you're smart enough to know what you're getting into by now. I'll do my best to protect you from them. Look in those chests through there," he added as he headed towards the door, gesturing at a tapestry that was the mirror opposite of the beaded curtain leading to the concubines' room. "I think I tore that moth-eaten shirt you were wearing, so go change. You'll find some of Sezerena's clothes through there. Don't wear anything with his sigil, that'd be of bad taste, but feel free to take anything else that grabs your fancy."

"Er..."

"I need to go," Darius said, settling his sheathed weapon back on his belt. "I'll send the first man I see up here to keep watch over you and help you get back to camp."

"That won't be necessary, Lord Ghan," said someone from the corridor outside.

Darius jumped and looked around. Then he sighed noisily. "I should have known you'd show up, Rand, you always seem to know when I have a conundrum I can't order a cavalry unit to charge at."

"Well put, my Lord," said Rand, still politely staying in the corridor while Ryou scrabbled for his fallen glasses, gathered his clothes about him and made his hurried way to the curtain Darius had indicated.

Chapter End Notes

This question comes up a fair bit, so I'll put it to bed right now. Nope, these two guys are never going to have penetrative sex for cultural reasons, mainly on Darius's part. What they are going to have though, in half a dozen chapters, is The Talk, where Darius and Ryou are confronted with the differences between their cultures when it comes to rolling about in the sheets. Now that they've gone ahead and become an item, there are other differences and matters of perception that are going to come trickling out in little bits and bobs.
Chapter 21

The room Ryou fled to was long and narrow, barely two meters wide. Ryou quickly pulled the tapestry back into place behind him. A bit of light snuck past it to illuminate rows of decorated wooden boxes, the larger ones on the floor, smaller ones lining two long shelves. The room smelled of sandalwood and dried flowers, a relief from the charnel stink in the other room which Ryou was getting a little too good at not thinking about... Ryou ditched that train of thought. It looked like he was going to have to reassert his moral compass here in the Outlands rather than in a shrink's office back home, and the result would undoubtedly be different, but one thing was certain: now was not the time to do it.

He'd stepped further into the room without thinking. He could barely see the chests anymore. At the far end of the walk-in wardrobe, another curtain was pulled aside, leading to yet another room, but that one was darkened and provided virtually no illumination. A sconce barely seen in the darkness held a candle, its creamy white wax a symbol of luxury in the Outlands, but Ryou had nothing to light it with so he didn’t venture further. From Sezerena's room behind him he could hear Rand moving around near the marble desk. A shuffle of papers confirmed that Rand was otherwise occupied, so Ryou dropped the heavy blanket and looked around for something to wear.

He flipped open the closest chest and found it filled with folded cloth. Ryou pulled out the top one, but it was just one large rectangular piece. So was the next. He opened the box to the right and pulled out yet another one, though his fingertips could tell this one was a richer, smoother material. There were symbols embroidered on the hem. A cloak or a toga, Ryou surmised. The chests on the top shelf were too small to hold clothes. He flipped open one of them out of curiosity, a lacquered box thirty centimeters wide for only a few high. It was filled with shallow clay pots, some open and revealing colored powders. It could be a cosmetic case or a medicine cabinet for all Ryou knew. He closed it and investigated a large chest on the other side of the narrow room. Ah, finally some real clothes, Ryou could tell from the way a hem caught his fingertips.

"Do you need assistance, sir?" Rand asked from right outside the dressing room.

"What? No," Ryou shot back, snatching up the article of clothing and fumbling it hastily, trying to find the way to put it on. He discerned the edges of a large hole at one end, and slipped it over his head.

"Allow me to come in," said Rand, lifting the side of the tapestry.

"I'm fine," Ryou answered from the folds of fabric he was pulling over his face. Fine linen slipped down his bare skin, unfortunately not fast enough to hide the mess all over his lower body.

Rand was silent for a short moment, his head silhouetted in the hand-span of light from the main room. Then he pulled the curtain completely aside and walked in. "My pardon, but I think you do need my assistance."

"No, I can manage."

"Since that is a woman's tunic you are putting on, and I'm fairly certain that was not your intent," Rand continued gravely, opening the first chest in the line.

Ryou looked down at what he'd slipped into. No, that hadn't been his intent. Besides, his selection was a soft tube of linen open both at the top and the bottom. He hadn't the faintest idea how this was supposed to be worn or held up.
"Did Darius tell you, ah...where I was from?"

"Yes, sir, from the Inlands." This seemed to perplex him not one iota, no more than finding Ryou undressed and alone with Darius in the first place. Ryou was trying to shake off the mental image of an imperturbable English butler...

"You can call me Ryou. If that's okay." Ryou didn't have a clue where Rand featured in the Assyrian political landscape; he seemed to behave like a manservant, but armed soldiers jumped to obey him like he was a general. Rand also knew Darius's real name and could use it alongside the King from what Targuta had said. Ryou had the feeling there was a lot of power in this man's unassuming hands. Having Rand call him 'sir' like he did Darius made Ryou nervous in an ill-defined way.

"If you wish," said Rand politely, holding up a plain brown tunic with long sleeves and a hem stitched in red thread. "This will do. There are a lot of Imperium-style clothes here, and I don't think that'd be wise to wear right now. I'll look for something better for you at a later date, now we need to get out of here and back to Ghan's praetorium. The city has been declared safe by the General, but that makes the citadel fair game, and once precedence is sorted out and the tithes removed, things are going to get noisy."

"Noisy?" Ryou had taken off the woman's dress and was holding it against his body. "I can't hear anything. The fighting is over, isn't it?"

Rand studied Ryou in the dimness, eyes sober. "I've heard myths about the Inlands that recounted terrible wars, slaughtering numbers that would have decimated the Empire several times over. Is that true?"

"What? Well I don't know about the numbers, but we've had wars of course. My country hasn't seen war on its soil in my lifetime, though."

Rand looked like he was contemplating that, eyes beneath the bangs wandering from Ryou to a shelf loaded with belts and shoes. "I see. My country has been at war all of my lifetime. Now I really do want to get you out of here." Rand didn't explain what he meant by that, he just pulled the tunic over Ryou's head. It was probably meant to go under something more decorative, it was all but unadorned and smelled of old oak. Rand grabbed an item from a small chest seemingly at random and looped a belt of metal links and the buckle inset with gems around Ryou's middle. Ryou didn't know about Aksumite or Assyrian style, but it was still pretty obvious this was the equivalent of putting a Rolex over the sleeve of a dirty sweatshirt. Rand's hand on Ryou's elbow steered him out of the dressing room and back to the bed before Ryou could decide whether it made sense to say anything or not, about either the style or the absence of britches.

Ryou found himself sitting on the high bed before he could put together any comment. Rand's cloak, still with him since yesterday, was handed to him without a word. While he sorted that out, Rand kneeled and laced up Ryou's shoes for him. Ryou was really going to have to find a way of asking the man who he was and what position he held in King Leyam's court.

Rand marched him just as ineluctably through the corridors and down the stairs of the citadel. There were soldiers in groups of six on every floor, eyes hard and weapons ready as if they expected an enemy attack still. There was a clamor from somewhere outside of the building. Ryou couldn't make anything of it out, it could have been a market-day brouhaha or the prelude to a counterattack.

Rand seemed to know the citadel like his own home; he led Ryou without hesitation to a guarded side door. The men posted there stopped talking amongst themselves in eager whispers and saluted hastily when they saw Rand. Rand did not pause. He opened the door and led Ryou out onto a fortification. It was a walkway built into a wall sided with wooden waist-high palisades. Ryou
glanced over the left side to see a plunging view of the city. He hadn't had that good a look at Essin until now. The buildings near the palace looked Greek to Ryou's untutored eyes, but further down the street they changed almost abruptly to become the sandy stacked squares he'd seen in Palis. The three streets he could see were deserted. Near the wall a canvas awning had been torn down and trampled along with broken pots and a shattered stool, immediate signs of recent violence, but no people. Maybe they were hiding in their homes. Hadn't someone mentioned the city was to be kept safe?

"Tell me about the Inlands," said Rand, pulling Ryou forward so fast Ryou staggered and had to hop to catch up.

"What?"

"Lord Ghan was recounting a few anecdotes last night. It sounded fascinating."

'Who the hell are you, how much did Darius tell you, and aren't you the least bit surprised I showed up in bed with your boss after you saw me off in the opposite direction this morning?!' Ryou internally ranted, a fine thread of patience snapping at too many rapid changes in his situation accumulating since yesterday. Caution, ingrained composure and courtesy stopped him from showing any sign of his inner thoughts, of course. He wasn't really angry at Rand or at anybody, just...tired. He felt drained, now that he had the time to catch his breath after talking to Darius. It was an odd, internalized sensation of tiredness that was not physical. Of course, Ryou suddenly realized; it was the way he'd felt after he'd moved the Honda through the dimensions, even though it wasn't anywhere quite as drastic after today's small hop. Made sense.

"How do your Inland chariots work? He described them, but he didn't know more about them."

"...You mean the cars?" Ryou glanced around as he heard someone shout a couple of streets away, a raucous cry that ended in an odd tremolo-

"Yes, those." Rand walked even faster. Ryou was having to trot to keep up with the taller man's strides.

"The border crossers had cars. I don't see why this place is stuck in antiquity when-" that probably hadn't been diplomatic to say out loud.

"Border crossers? Oh, those, yes. They stay in the no man's land, though. What they use there won't work elsewhere for the most part. The Gods discourage those who seek answers outside of the confines of their own soil. So do the Per Gathas," Rand added dryly, the tone telling Ryou whose strictures were more consequential. It seemed Rand was not an overly religious man.

"But Darius mentioned the Alliance has cannons." The wooden poles of the palisades rose and fell regularly, and sometimes came together to form little guard posts, empty at present. Ryou wondered how far they could go this way. From his view on the hillside, Ryou did remember the city of Essin had been divided into section by internal walls, doubling around the palace.

"Oh yes, but we make those weapons in Assyria. The Gods also encourage us to fight to the best of our abilities," Rand said with a touch of ironic humor.

"And the Per Gathas?" Ryou couldn't help but asking in much the same tone.

"They're either pretending we don't have them or that we invented them on our own." Rand's creased cheeks twitched, almost letting slip a smile. Ryou still wasn't sure about this man, but he thought he'd be able to get along with him.
They talked about cars, Gods and technology while the thin battlements gave way to a major one at the main wall. They walked along that until Rand lead him down into the fortifications and to the main gate, and from there on back to the camp Ryou had left behind only a few hours prior.

It was looking for him.

It scratched at the walls of that flimsy thing called reality. The more it dug and insinuated itself towards him, the clearer he could see it with this sense that did not involve vision. It was a ridged grey sac larger than a beach ball, sprouting projections in every direction. Like a nerve ganglia in a nest of neurones, but these jointed protrusions, thick as a man’s wrist, sprouted out over an area that would cover the size and volume of a house and were tipped with hard bony black chitin. They scratched-scratched-scratched. The ganglia at the center pulsed. Ryou could sense it. It was intelligent in a way so totally alien to the human mind that he could not gauge it. And it was looking for him. It knew him. He’d crossed its territory, left a trail, and now he was prey.

Ryou huddled in a dark corner. He was thirteen and hiding in his room from what he’d done. No, he was twenty-nine and hiding from a monster out of nightmares. Nightmares- dreaming? He was dreaming?

Scratch scratch scratch.

It wanted to find him. It was going to find him, invade him from a direction that should not even exist and lay its children in his brain.

It was getting closer. It was nearly here. People moved around it, even walked through it since it was still not close enough to intersect their reality. Men clinked past it in armor, sang and laughed as it insinuated its way towards them no more than a shadow’s width away.

More noises nearby. A few hushed words in a familiar voice softer than the scritching sounds. Ryou's ears pricked. Clinks, a thud. Darius muttered an imprecation- Darius?!

"Watch out!" shouted Ryou, bolting upright in bed.

Darius jumped, hands frozen in the act of giving his sword to an attending soldier. His subordinate was already holding the red and black hauberk and armor, though he dropped the helm in shock. The two large hounds scrambled to their feet where they'd been sitting near their master and stared at Ryou with much the same expression of astonishment.

Ryou gaped, looking around for a monster that did not exist. But the shadows, flickering from the light thrown by a set of candles in a holder, were empty.

"Sir?" The tapestries partitioning the private quarters from the rest of the pavilion were jerked aside and a guard poked his head in. Another hovered at his shoulder.

"It's fine," said Darius, still watching Ryou. Then he took his hand away from where it'd instinctively gripped his sword's hilt and turned towards his men. "It's fine. He's just got a case of nerves; his first battle. Leave. You can keep watch out front. You too," he told the soldier attending him and who was still staring at Ryou in slack-jawed amazement.
The guards obeyed immediately. The attendant bobbed at Darius and followed them out with the armor, presumably to go and clean off the smudges of blood.

Darius waited until the men had left, then he propped the sword against an open chest of clothes, crossed the space between them and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Are you alright?"

Ryou had had the time to sort fantasy from reality. Reality was already knotted, complex and thorny enough, he didn't need imaginary monsters to deal with as well. At least he thought it was imaginary...Though he could not explain it in words, that fledgling ability that had allowed him to feel the Rajin Bher's arrival so many days ago and sense the dog-creature's presence back in Palis was now stretched to its limit, and he could not feel anything suspicious stirring.

"I'm sorry I startled you, it's nothing," he said, scrubbing his face and trying to rid himself of the memory of that ugly alien thing by sheer willpower. "Just a nightmare."

"A bad dream?" Darius looked at him searchingly. "Should I call for the augur?"

"The what?"

"The augur. Bad dreams of that scale should be properly interpreted."

"Ahhh, no, that's okay."

Darius was frowning. "If this is in any way a forewarning of disaster, we need to know, especially if we're about to be attacked. A few years ago, my friend Shahram woke up like that after a dream of a bull getting killed by a pack of wolves, and three days later half our unit were slaughtered in a Roman ambush, including him."

"It's okay, Darius, it was just a dream." One he would have no hopes of describing. And though he could not feel anything hostile coming near, Ryou instinctively felt that it was probably dangerous to talk about that thing, or even think about it too hard. It would be...it would be like sending up a beacon. Once more Ryou could not even find the words in his own mind to describe what he was sensing, but in a world of multiple dimensions where the human mind could use maths to pierce the map of reality, it somehow held a kind of logic. And if there truly was something out there, Ryou felt he was better equipped at handling it than the local shaman.

A furry feeling made him glance down. One of the large hounds had put its head on the bed over Ryou's hands and was looking up at him soulfully.

"Good doggy," he muttered, mind still mostly elsewhere. There was slobber on the back of his hand. He pulled it away without making any sudden movements and wiped it discreetly against the covers.

Darius looked unconvinced. "Are you sure? You were awfully white in the face."

"Don't worry, I'm feeling much better," said Ryou briskly, glancing at his watch. "Three o'clock? Rand had someone bring me lunch and then he said I should rest, but I didn't think I'd sleep three whole hours. I'm sorry I invaded your space without asking," he added, gesturing at Darius's pavilion and the bed, a frame strung with ropes holding a rag-stuffed mattress. "Rand said it'd be best if I stayed here, because the tent and things I used last night were being tithed, whatever that means."

Darius was silent for a spell, gaze not wavering even when the dog put its head hopefully beneath his hand.

"Tithed means being distributed as part of pay-out after the battle, all tribute and capture being split according to rank and merit, as well as that portion set aside for the gods. Rand was right that it is
best you stay here, to make it clear who it is who protects you, as you are a stranger in our lands. As for the time, I never got my head around your time keeping, but it's the middle of the night, the fourth qa, so I really do have to ask," Darius added with an unblinking look that drilled right through Ryou, "considering that you slept the equivalent of a whole day without realizing it, are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine," repeated Ryou a little weakly, stupidly glancing at the edges where tent met ground - with no hint of sunlight peaking through - and then at his watch again. Darius knew what clocks were, though he didn't use them himself. He'd told Ryou that the countries that did use them started their 'day' when the sun rose. This meant that the clocks had to be reset each day at dawn, but that was okay, they were so inexact they'd probably have to be reset anyway. Darius had been curious about Ryou's watch and had borrowed it for twenty four hours while traveling through Palis, but he still didn't get the concept of a day that started arbitrarily in the middle of the night. So it was up to Ryou to figure out that his Seiko was informing him it was three in the morning. He'd slept fifteen hours without stirring.

"I'm just a bit tired," he added diplomatically, avoiding Darius's gaze.

Darius said nothing, absent-mindedly scratching the mutt's ears, which resulted in a thump-thump-thump of tail on the beaten dirt floor covered in carpets. Finally he made a grumpy noise. "I'd be a hypocrite lecturing you on your use of magic earlier, when I cannot deny that I am glad you came back. Just swear to me that you will not do that again. You-...I can't believe you managed to do that without training, but you might not get so lucky next time. And it's not just that. The Per Gathas might-...Just don't."

"I shouldn't need to anyway," said Ryou, an evasion Darius fortunately didn't catch. It wasn't that Ryou thought he'd need to do something like that to talk to Darius again, at least he certainly hoped they'd be able to discuss future misunderstandings without any grandstanding or need for extremes. But Ryou's ability might come in handy in the future. If a monster from the realm of nightmares managed to track him down, for example. He wouldn't know how to fight it, but he was certain that this 'magic' of his was the way to do it rather than waving a dagger around.

Darius looked willing to put the subject aside. He lost his serious scowl and put more attention into rubbing the hound's head and neck.

"Do you like dogs?" he asked over the ecstatic writhing and whimpering that resulted.

"We never had any," answered Ryou, instead of 'I've always thought they were dirty, noisy and not very bright. I'm not really that good with animals, I prefer computers.'

Darius looked like he had something to say, but didn't know how to go about putting it into words. "I never bothered with them much when I was a kid, but then-...It's not that I like them all that much. dogs are for warfare, hounding prey and guarding the house. But then I spent a lot of time with them, and I found them to be better than most men are." He stared at the hound, then made a dismissive gesture. "That'll be a tale for another day. Cham, Zuru, out."

The dogs rubbed against his legs and then turned without fuss to slip beneath the partition and head towards another part of the tent. Darius watched them go, elbows propped on his knees, a slump in his shoulders. Ryou studied him with growing concern, which peaked into a worried "Are you alright?" when he noticed a slit in the russet linen tunic near Darius's shoulder blade.

"Fine," Darius answered, rubbing his eyes. "Oh, that," he added, when Ryou touched the hole in his top. "Someone hit me from the back with an aclys or something before Dyo could nail him; a glancing blow, no harm done, but the impact on the armor tore the tunic. I'll have it repaired." The
last words were muffled as he pulled it over his head, unconcerned that he was naked beneath it.

There was a nice deep bruise forming where the 'glancing blow' had landed. Ryou wondered how he'd failed to notice Darius was injured earlier. Then again, they'd been busy.

Darius shrugged off the injury along with Ryou's suggestion of medical care. "The devotees of Hygiea have more than enough to deal with tonight. Ugh, talking of which, that's why I'm so tired. That son of a sick goat, Terentius - whom I otherwise love like a brother - had the good idea of making me the one to talk to Essin's Holy Seer. He said I'd scare her into submission. Yeah, right, she was awfully scared. The woman has a voice like a dozen harpies, and she talked about every - single - detail. Assurances we wouldn't take anything from the Temples. That'd we restrain our soldiers so they wouldn't help themselves to more than the allotted tribute. My personal word that every bloody donkey in Essin would still be in its stable by the end of the month. We haggled over access to the wells, over the donations to make to each temple and the price to pay any father who saw one of his daughters knocked up. I damn well agreed to everything she asked for by the end just to get away, and just as I was standing up to leave, she starts talking about the provisions we are going to bring the temple while we're here, to feed the priests, Romans and the women hiding out there. The gall of the bitch; every single bloody temple in her town is decorated with the Sun of Aten, and she wants me to bring her a basket of bread and a bottle of wine. Fuck. I told the Fury she was lucky I didn’t rip them all down and bury the cowards inside beneath the rubble, and that clammed her up long enough for me to get out the door. Damn, sometimes I wish we were back in the old days when women were only charged with the temple of Ishhara and otherwise shut up and did what they were told."

Ryou had never thought of himself as an ardent defender of women's rights, but the words "Why would a male priest have asked for anything less?" still slipped out by reflex, a knee-jerk demand for common sense.

"No reason, but I could have threatened him more," Darius grumbled. "I swore to my brother back when I was seventeen that I'd never mistreat another woman again, and every female in the Outlands from here to the Maurya Empire somehow knows it. Never mind, I finished that and my other duties for today, I even managed to drink the cup of victory with the men and eat a bite, and now I have a few hours to spend on my own pursuits," Darius finished with a crooked smile. "That reminds me, here. I was keeping this for you."

As he said that, he reached towards the only thing he was wearing at this point: a golden brace clasped around his upper arm. He twisted and pulled it off, letting his hand sink once as if gauging the weight and, finding it sufficient, passed it to Ryou. The metal was warm beneath Ryou's fingers from the heat of Darius's skin. It was studded with large round semi-precious stones of a deep black, onyx Ryou thought.

"What is-"

"A gift," said Darius, leaning back, one hand propped against the sheets.

"I don't need anything," Ryou said, bewildered. "I mean, you already gave me-" he gestured at the bracer around his right forearm.

"That was for protection. This is a gift. It's something Sezerena had, so it's not like he's gonna miss it."

Oh boy. Ryou stared at the jewel. He was already grappling with what Darius had meant earlier about swearing not to mistreat 'another' woman again, and how Ryou was going to ask about that and if he should. Now he had another moral quandary to add to that.
Darius looked puzzled. "What's wrong?"

"Um." Ryou knew that the line he was drawing was completely arbitrary, but accepting what had happened today and the violence that would surround him in the future was one thing. Receiving war plunder obtained from the bloodied body of the man he'd seen dragged away by the heels earlier just seemed like going too far past the point of no return.

But how to explain this to Darius, who was looking at him quizzically and, beneath the blunt exterior, seemed just a little disappointed at Ryou's reaction?

"My grandfather-" started Ryou and stopped in sheer amazement that he was even contemplating saying this. But he was free to do so now, he realized. That was an upside to burning one's bridges; it put a certain distance between oneself and the past.

"My father founded Ujiie Security and Trading after selling off my grandfather's firm for a lot of money," Ryou said, staring at the golden jewel cupped in his palm. It hardly seemed to matter that Darius might not understand all the words and notions he was using. "My grandfather built his fortune up from scratch after a terrible war that...I can't tell you what it did to my country, I don't think you have the concepts. Suffice to say that populations four times the size of Essin's were wiped out overnight during some of the attacks, and it went on for months. Yeah," he said in acknowledgement to Darius's look of shock and superstitious sign to ward off evil. "It left my country devastated...My grandfather had friends in the new government, and he used them to obtain contracts and build up a transport and reconstruction business to help the worse hit areas. It made him very powerful politically, and very rich. He was proud of the fact that he'd bettered himself that much. He was just the third son of a minor Kyoto family before the war. When I was young, I thought it was a great story, and a great thing for my grandfather to have done. I did not understand why my father didn't like to discuss it. It was only later, during my schooling, that I learned a bit more about all this. How many of the men who were involved in the rebuilding made money by skimming off the funds that had been earmarked by the Allies for aid, to the detriment of people terribly afflicted by the war. My father took me and my brother to a war museum when we were young, and...it...stuck with me to this day. I don't think even my father knows for certain if our family was implicated in those kind of deals. My grandfather can't tell us now, he's in a home, dementia, he can't even speak anymore, and of course my father would never dig deeper. We've never even discussed this out loud, but I think he suspects...

Ryou looked down at his hands. Somewhere in a far-off land possibly several dimensions away from this one, his father must have woken from a sound sleep with the knowledge that his eldest son had just done something irremediable to their family name. Ryou did not think he'd managed to adequately express his feelings on the matter anyway. He could barely remember his grandfather as a healthy man, and their family name had never been attached to any scam or scandal that'd been investigated decades later, to everyone's relief. In fact Ryou was convinced his grandfather was guilty of nothing more than being at the right spot at the right time with the right idea and the will to make a lot of money, with perhaps a little hedging on the bills and hiking a few prices thrown in. Not that much all in all, and if their family had any bad karma still attached to them, then Ryou knew his father was working on that. He had to give the president his due on that account; he always kept a close eye on UST's dealings, and the company made charitable donations to various causes. It didn't feel particularly charitable when his father did it, Ryou conceded, more a matter of personal expiation for the sin of having made money the smart way rather than the honorable way, but he still did it. So would Ryou, even if it was for the same, flimsy personal reasons.

"It's just something I believe in, that most of my countrymen believe in very strongly. War is something that must be avoided at all cost, and never, ever profited from," he concluded.
Darius digested that in silence for a moment before pointing out the obvious. "Ryou, we're at war-

"I know, I know. But that's justified. Even pacifists - people who believe in peace back in the Inlands - even they agree that resisting invasion is permissible," said Ryou, bending the truth a little.

Darius gave him a pointed look. "You do remember this is not Assyria, right?"

"...Well, King Ka is one of the founders of the Alliance and he did invite you and Terentius to help him pacify a province that was risking the stability of the whole region...you're sort of a peacekeeping force."

"A what?"

"Never mind. Um, thank you for the gift, but I don't think I can..."

"Well as long as you're with me, you won't lack for bread and wine," said Darius prosaically, picking the brace from Ryou's fingers and tossing it from hand to hand. "I'll give it to tithe to someone."

"Could you give it to Targuta and his men?"

"Who? Oh, those lame sheep who let you slip loose so you could go and nearly get yourself killed."

Ryou took it from Darius's tone that he did not like the suggestion. "That was my own decision and my own doing, you know. And you said you didn't regret the result. Don't hold it against them."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll see to it they get half a share," Darius grumbled. "But damned if I'm showing them favor beyond that. Discipline would go to the dogs." The bracelet described another arc through the air.

"The tent I was in last night," said Ryou, watching the golden hoop dance before his eyes.

"Huh?"

"Rand said the man who owned it had died."

"Yeah? Oh yeah, Dionysodoros told me. Teratiqas, one of my officers. A lucky shot from a Bowman up on the wall while his party was scouting the river fork. It's a damned shame, he was a good man."

"Did he have a family?"

"Yeah, several by the sounds of it, the horny goat," Darius snorted, then he glanced down at the jewel with understanding. "Oh, you want them to have this?"

"If that's all right."

"Sure, I'll get Jexen to get it to them." Darius tossed the jewel onto the end of the bed, then he put his freed hand on Ryou's cheek. "Ah, my gentle, selfless magian, a better man than I would have marched you to the Paths and kicked you back to your kindly country. But that man is not me..."

Ryou knew damn well he wasn't selfless, since all he was indulging was his own skewed sense of ethics which he was compromising anyway, but it didn't seem to be worth discussing further.

The hand on his cheek dropped to touch Ryou gently on the left arm. Ryou glanced down and noted with some surprise a new set of bruises appearing. Oh yes, from where he'd fallen off the horse after his jump through space. As if the sight was a reminder, Ryou suddenly realized he felt sore and stiff
Darius's finger traced the mark so gently it didn't hurt. His gaze was tracing something else, Ryou's bare chest. Darius reached down and twitched the blanket back. Ryou managed not to reflexively cover himself, though from the hedonistic way Darius smiled, he'd not have been allowed to anyway.

"I'm out of clothes," Ryou mumbled. His usual willpower banished any trace of blush that might have been tempted to invade his cheeks. It wasn't quite as effective at keeping the heat from creeping down to his loins and causing his dick to twitch and stir beneath that gaze like a hungry caress. "I just have that tunic over there-

"We'll do something about that tomorrow. What you're wearing now suits my tastes just fine," was the foreseeable answer. "Tell me, Ryou, are you tired?"

"No," said Ryou after clearing his throat. "Aren't you, though?"

"Oh yeah, but I still have some energy to burn," answered Darius, that smile now near Ryou's ear. "You told me much about your home, even if I'm too dumb a mutt to understand it all, but there's one thing you didn't tell me. Do they suck cock in the Inlands?"

Ryou felt a smile twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Yes, as it happens, we do," he answered very seriously, sliding his arms around Darius's neck.

The deep, searing kiss that followed blew out the last dregs of weariness Ryou might have felt, while Darius's hand dropped between Ryou's legs and completed the job of getting him fully erect, fast and without much subtlety. Ryou tore his mouth away with a gasp to avoid accidentally nipping Darius's lips. Assyrians must not be big on foreplay...Especially not this one and not now. Ryou could feel a tension in the shoulders he gripped, a fitfully burning force as Darius captured his mouth again.

Darius had gotten up early this morning, had fought until noon and had spent the rest of the day and night sorting out details and other sundries without the benefit of Ryou's long hours of sleep. He was currently burning up the last of his strength. It was a given that this was not going to last long again.

Ryou ran his hand down the strong back, avoiding the injured shoulder; chasing with the pressure from the heel of his palm the dying waves of tension that'd stop his lover from collapsing and sleeping like the dead as soon as they were done. Darius made a contented noise deep in his throat, a rumble like a big cat's purr. Ahead of his palm, Ryou's fingers explored the dips between muscles, the bony bumps of the spine and tripped over the etch of scars he'd only seen up until now - the memory of Darius bathing in that stream was going to haunt him until the day he died, or at least Ryou fervently hoped so.

"What's this?" he whispered, his fingertips feeling out tiny dips and dimples across his lover's lower back and bare thighs, losing themselves in the dark hair peppering Darius's legs.

"Hmm, a plague that spread from Kalicee when I was young," Darius said, talking into the skin of Ryou's throat. "Killed one of my royal siblings yet left me virtually intact. The Gods are either blind or have their very own sense of amusement." Then Darius slid off the bed, dragging Ryou's legs around and apart so that the startled Ryou found himself sitting on the edge of the bed with Darius, hands on Ryou's thighs, looking up at him with that heated gaze.

"What?" croaked Ryou, overly aware that the only walls separating them from a camp full of soldiers were made of canvas. He cleared his throat and kept his voice low. "What are you doing?"

Darius gave him a lopsided smirk. "Seriously, Ryou, what do you think?"
Ryou shook his head ruefully. "Right. But I thought..." For some reason, he'd thought the positions would be reversed. Not that he had any problem with this.

"As you learned earlier, I'm far from the ideal lover," murmured Darius, still looking up at him unblinking. "Half the stories of Ghan the Beast come from the bed sports of my youth. And don't mistake me, I'm not that much older and wiser now. But I'll do it properly. This time."

Ryou tried to put into words how much he'd really liked what had happened earlier that day and how he did not understand why Darius was suggesting he'd done something wrong, but this time had been said against a very delicate and sensitive piece of skin, followed by a flick of tongue, and Ryou forgot how to put words into sentences. Darius gave him an evil smirk from where he was kneeling between Ryou's legs. He brushed his hair out of the way and leaned down once more. Ryou decided that words were not really that important after all - he could live perfectly fine without them for the next few minutes at any rate - and he relaxed and let the surging pleasure banish the last shreds of his nightmare vision back to the abyss.
The next day started out wonderfully. Ryou's sleep was not plagued by any more scary visions, which his burgeoning instincts suggested was a good sign. Better yet, he woke up next to Darius, and despite the complexities of his situation here, the pitfalls that might lurk between them, virtual strangers that they still were, Ryou felt a rare and pure moment of happiness as he watched his lover sleep. Sleeping very soundly indeed, one arm thrown up above his head, eyes closed, face relaxed. He'd wrapped his hair in a twist of cloth tied at the nape to avoid having the disks braided into the ends clink against the roll of blanket that served as pillow. With his hair pulled back like that, Darius looked different, younger, and a little less fierce.

A dog yipped in the main part of the pavilion, followed by a soft mutter of "Shhh, Zuru."

Ryou, who'd glanced around automatically at the noise, jumped as he realized Darius was now sitting up beside him, bleary eyes fixed on the partition giving them a semblance of privacy.

"Rand, is that you?"

"Yes, sir." Rand slipped between the tapestries before Ryou could think of anything to say that'd stop this man from finding him naked in bed with Darius for the second time in twenty-four hours.

Darius rubbed his eyes. "What is it?" he asked. By the sound of it he'd have liked to enjoy another couple hours of sleep. According to Ryou's watch, it was only a little past six in the morning.

"You wanted me to tell you as soon as the Essin border had a passer again," said Rand. He'd graced Ryou with a small nod of greeting on entering and otherwise didn't seem to find anything noteworthy about their sleeping arrangements.

"Already? That was fast," said Darius, sleep banished. "And? Can we get to Mooncrest any time soon?"

"I doubt it, my Lord."

"Bugger. You got my hopes up," Darius muttered, shoulders slumping. "I really need to talk to Leyam as soon as I can."

"I agree. As for traveling, the Path to Tanatoria will be open all morning."

"Tanatoria? That works just as well." Darius threw back the coverlet in an excess of renewed energy and regardless of his nudity, not that it'd ever bothered him before. Ryou, for his part, kept the thin cover conservatively curled over his lap. "Put together an escort, I'll go square things with Terentius after I break my fast. I'm as hungry as a lion. Make that two lions," he said with a faint smirk back at Ryou which suggested there'd been some undertone to that remark that'd been both culturally significant and ever so slightly lewd.

Rand for his part did not even blink. "Yes sir. I've taken the liberty of waking Dionysodoros already."

"Good. When you see him, tell him it's his last chance to change his mind. Seeing how he directed the Hounds for over a twelveday in my absence, he can continue leading the main guard in Teratiqa's place while the Hounds are still in Essin and beyond, if he wants to."

"I already discussed it with him," was the answer, with a hint of sourness that suggested the
conversation had not gone according to Rand's wishes. "He reaffirms that he prefers to head your personal guard until Dela comes back. I tried to explain why it would be useful if you and he were not in the same group."

"I'll make damn sure you don't need a lookalike taking my place again, Rand, so it's Dio's choice to turn down a promotion and ride the harder road," said Darius with a shrug, though beneath it he sounded pleased. "Go find our crazy Ionian, tell him to put together that escort and get his commander some food."

"Yes, sir," said Rand, already beyond the tapestries.

Dressed in one of Darius's two spare tunics, Ryou joined his lover in the main part of the pavilion for a meal of unleavened barley bread, honey, dates, dried figs, strips of jerky and milk. Cow's milk, to Ryou's surprise and delight. Raw and thick, it would have made him gag in anything other than his latte two weeks ago, but after struggling with goat's milk for awhile, Ryou knew a good thing when he tasted it.

The pavilion's flap was tied up; beyond it the camp bustled with soldiers in good spirits going about their business in the early morning sunshine. It was a wonderful day, a wonderful breakfast, which Ryou and Darius had exactly five minutes to enjoy before Rand stuck his head back into the tent and said, "My lord Ghan?"

"Yes. But call me by my name when it's just the three of us," Darius said in passing, giving Ryou a warm glow.

"Yes sir," said Rand, in what may or may not have been an example of poker-faced humor. "The escort is nearly ready, and General Terentius's aide said his master is up and can see you shortly."

"Good." Darius dropped his slice of bread on his plate and brushed off his hands briskly as he got to his feet. "You're off to Aksum capital today as well, yes?"

Rand nodded. "King Ka's emissaries are returning to their master this afternoon, I will join them."

"I'm sure those pompous asses will enjoy your company," said Darius with a nasty smirk. "Can you give Ka the usual salutations for me? I don't have time to muddle around with a tablet. Ryou and I will leave before the sun is too high, a qa at most. That will take us to the Path before mid-morning, and from there we can be in Sura in three days time."

Rand looked surprised. "Sir, it's four days ride from Tanatoria to Sura, at least."

"No, no, the road's should have been clear of snow for over a month now, we can make it in three days if we ride hard and change horses at the provincial outpost on the second night."

"It's four days or more riding normally," said Rand, his eyes flickering towards Ryou.

"Oh, don't worry on his account," said Darius, clapping Ryou on the shoulder hard enough to make the latter drop the fig he was holding. "I know he doesn't look it, but he's as tough as Kalkal's doorknob. He'll be fine."

Rand gave Ryou a sympathetic look and then left to presumably get things ready.

Ryou wasn't particularly looking forward to spending the next three days peering at the road ahead between the ears of a horse, but it didn't occur to him to complain. Darius needed to see his brother. There was a war on, the king of Assyria would expect his commander to report back now that Essin had fallen. But it was nice of Rand to be concerned for him. Ryou liked the man more and more.
"Darius, what does Rand do?"

Darius had been giving the rest of his bread and some jerky to the dogs. He looked a little perplexed at Ryou's question. "Do?"

"I mean, what's his job? He serves King Leyam, right?"

"That's right."

"What does he do? He seems very...organized. And he's been very helpful to me."

Darius scratched his chin. "Hmm. It's hard to put into so many words, really. Rand came to Leyam and me back when our lives weren't worth a pinch of sand. He swore fealty to Leyam and risked his life many times to help us get rid of my brother's regent. Since that messy business at Algmar, he can't work from the shadows anymore, too many people know who he is, so now he's Leyam's factotum. He's...let's just say, Rand's the kind of man who can find out something before it even happens, and if that something is dangerous to Leyam, then it's got a noose around its neck whether it knows it or not. But he has an official role too, he bears a tablet with Leyam's seal and speaks with the King's voice when Leyam needs something done with a fair degree of seriousness and urgency. He's very good at that, too, it's amazing how well people listen to Leyam's word when it's Leyam's former strangler who bears it."

"His what?"

"Strangler. Oh, your kindly Inlands won't have anything like that, I wager. Strangler is a misnomer to start with, since a strangler will use anything, even poison if that's called for, to insure your enemies can talk over the error of their ways with the Furies. Every great clan has them. But compared to the kind of dispensable fools who carry a garrote around until they're killed off themselves, Rand is something else altogether, and he's become a lot more. Leyam has always had the knack of using a man to the best of his abilities. I have to go, I've got to organize our journey and break the news to Terentius that he's taking care of Essin after all." Darius looked pleased at ditching his obligations and leaving now. He strode out of the tent, the hounds trotting at his heels, leaving a motionless and silent Ryou behind him.

Ryou had wanted to ride at Darius's side again and share a campfire beneath the stars; it'd been one of those wild wishes that'd pushed him to take that leap of faith and magic yesterday to get him back into Essin. Today he'd gotten his wish, though not quite the way he'd envisioned it...Ryou watched the organized commotion around him, bemused. For some strange reason, he'd subconsciously assumed the escort would accompany them to the border, and then it would be just him and Darius again. An idiotic notion that would surely insult the fourteen men of Lord Ghan's picked personal guard who'd packed up at double speed and ridden off with them.

To Ryou's surprise, it seemed he possessed a tiny romantic fiber in his body - half an inch at most - that would have liked to be alone on the road with nobody but his lover for company. But Ryou's much greater practical side easily outvoted it to decide this could only be a change for the better. An ambush was no longer a concern, for starters. Four scouts ranged ahead and behind the main group at all times. A small force attacking their party would not survive the well trained battle-hardened Hounds, while a larger force could be outrun and outmaneuvered. Since they had extra horses for baggage, Ryou could look forward to a night in a proper bedroll on a bed of strewn bracken, his stomach full of lamb stew that had been a cut above the fare he and Darius had made do with these
past two weeks. The men bustled about, setting up guards on the perimeter, maintaining the fire in the pit they'd dug out, warming water from the creek for their Lord and his guest to wash up in, and doing all the horse-related chores Ryou had once done himself. All Ryou had to do was sit down and rest after the hard slog. He'd have been ready to pitch in, since he did not want the men of Darius's unit thinking badly of him - and god only knew what they thought at this point. But as soon as he picked up a bucket, grabbed a brush or unfolded a blanket, a soldier materialized at his side with a faintly pained look on his face to relieve him of it with an apology and a 'do not disturb yourself, sir'. After five minutes of this, Darius, probably operating on a hint from Dionysodoros, had walked over and told Ryou to sit down and take it easy if he didn't want to hobble himself. He was referring to Ryou's arm, which had started to ache midway through the fast-paced ride and was now telling Ryou that Darius might have a point.

"Here you go. Drink this," said Darius, sitting on the fallen tree trunk a couple of Hounds had drawn up near the fire, apparently for Ryou's exclusive benefit and to the latter's surprise.

"Thanks." Ryou accepted the cup of warmed spiced wine, steaming in the cold air, and took a long draught in the hopes it would act like an anesthetic for his aching arm and stiffened muscles. Darius had said it contained herbs that would help. They didn't hurt the taste at any rate. The local wines wouldn't be used for vinegar back home; discerning Assyrians sweetened their drink with palm sugar or honey, same as the beer. All of it, of course, safer than the water...This cup was quite good in comparison, Ryou decided, taking a smaller second sip; it'd also been filtered with a cloth to get rid of the heavy sediment.

Ryou put down the cup, making sure the goblet was stable on the ground, and looked back down at the map he was supposed to be studying instead of woolgathering. Tanatoria was an Assyrian province, the closest to Sura, the capital. They'd been traveling through Darius's home country since before noon, on a paved road that cut through the rough terrain separating the various provinces. Darius had given Ryou the map, drawn with black ink on sheep's hide, when the latter showed some interest in the area. It wasn't precise, but it gave Ryou an idea of the geography of the northern part of Assyria, assuming his tired mind could gather enough of his concentration to study it.

A curious plonk-plonk-plonk noise made Ryou glance up again. One of the soldiers had drawn a bizarre instrument from his baggage and appeared to be tuning it. A sealed tortoise shell served as the base, two animal horns fixed into it. A stick near the top joined the two horns together. Four strings ran from the stick to the shell, completing an odd-looking hand harp or lyre, though it wasn't anywhere that melodious.

Men gathered around, talking in quiet voices and laughing. Ryou watched them discreetly. Most of them had been in the group that'd ridden out after him to save Darius two days ago, faces burning with determination and ferocity that'd unified them in intent. Now that they were walking around chatting in the light of the fire, Ryou could see them as individuals rather than as a scary group, and he could already associate some names with varied features from all over the Outlands, as well as scars, tattoos, various skin diseases and warts (the devotees of Hygiea saved peoples lives, not their looks, and in the local culture it was considered unseemly for a grown man to worry about the latter). One thing Ryou had quickly noticed was that none of these soldiers could be more than a year past the age of twenty, the exception being Dionysodoros, currently making his way towards Ryou and Darius. The Ionian officer was closer to Darius's age, twenty five or so. Ryou concluded he was the oldest man around by half a decade and wasn't sure what to do with that thought.

"Sir," said Dionysodoros, drawing up in front of Darius. He gave Ryou the same bow, hand pressed against his chest, that he gave his leader, to Ryou's surprise. "The men would like to do an honor dance for our return to Assyria, with your permission."
Darius nodded. "Just tell them to watch it. We're not finished with this campaign."

"Yes sir," replied Dionysodoros, before gesturing at the men behind him, his fist waving back and forth as if about to throw a lasso. Gestures, unlike words, were fully subject to the Curse of Babel, but Ryou gathered from the enthusiastic rise in the voices and the sudden outburst of directed activity that Dionysodoros had given the men the go ahead.

The man with the tortoise harp started plonking on his strings, the dull sound almost percussion more than harmony, yet it did have a modulated thumping appeal to it. It was expanded upon when another man sat down next to him and started blowing into pan pipes that could have come right out of an interactive museum exhibit on ancient European countries. The music was simple, repetitive, quick-paced enough where the disparate sounds blended together in an effervescent whole. The men gathered in a loose half circle, leaving space for both the bonfire and for Ryou and Darius to see. They were hooting and laughing and already clapping their hands in time to the rapid beat, looking off to the left where some of their numbers were busying themselves around the baggage.

Two men ran into the circle and got down on one knee, facing each other over a meter of empty space. What they were doing there wasn't clear, even less so when they unwrapped the objects they held in rough woolen blankets to reveal a pair of swords. They drew the weapons and held them at ground level, gripping the hilt so that the cutting edge was straight up. The blades were parallel, two feet apart. A third man had followed them into the circle of firelight. As soon as his friends had knelt down, he leapt into the space between the swords and started to dance.

Ryou's eyes progressively widened as his gaze bounced from the man's sandaled feet to the edges of the blades glinting in the firelight.

The soldier had cast off his hauberk like many of the others who weren't on guard duty, though he'd kept the black scarf around his neck; it fluttered around his shoulders as he leapt back and forth, playing a crazy kind of hopscotch over the blades and back again in time with the music.

"Isn't that a little dangerous?" Ryou couldn't help asking once the power of speech returned.

"That? No, that's fine," said Darius, a grin in his voice.

The moves were so fast Ryou could barely keep up, succeeding each other without pause. The soldier jumped forward and one foot hit the ground before the front blade. He jumped back, and his left foot landed in the middle of the square. A spin, right foot behind the back blade - there was also movements side to side, limited by the presence of the men on his left and right, holding the swords and grinning up at him.

"Go, Romrama!" someone from the laughing, hooting crowd shouted, encouraging the dancer. Romrama grinned, he was looking down but not with the concentration Ryou would have thought was required. His feet looked so light, he could almost be floating. The men had started to shout, something like 'Hey hu! Hey hu! Hey hu!' in time with the rhythm, and Romrama danced between the blades like it was effortless.

"Come on!" shouted the man on the lyre, and the plonking took on a new intensity.

The men burst into song - Darius too, singing and clapping along with them, words as fast as the rhythm. And the blades-

- the blades beneath Romrama's feet began to sweep back and forth at the same cadence.

Ryou's jaw sagged. The fallen map rolled up unheeded at his feet.
The lyre's rhythmic plonk was now joined by the percussive sound of the blades clashing together. Their owners were moving them from one side to the other while keeping them straight, so they met together blade to blade in the middle - *clash!* - before sweeping out again and thudding - *clack!* - against the tips of the worn-out scabbards. The swordsmen had propped the latter upright next to their knees to help them delimit the square. Obviously, thought Ryou; if the width the swords traveled changed, it would change the tempo of their sweep, and then the dancer- It was precision work, one on which their comrade's feet depended, but the grinning soldiers didn't make it look all that hard.

"Now that's a little dangerous," said Darius with obvious amusement once the first stanza of the song finished.

And it probably was, but Romrama was grinning like victory incarnate to the encouragement of the others, a fearless joy in his every step between the blades that were now dancing with him, in, out, spin, right foot landing where the forward sword had been but a moment before-

Ryou, watching him, found himself gaining a seed of understanding of the kind of man who could enjoy this unreasonable pursuit, as well as join the Hounds with their dangerous reputation, their brand-new off-the-cuff guerilla tactics and the risks they incurred; the bloody-minded joy of men who'd chosen to live intensely rather than live long...

The second stanza started, still fast yet melodic in its harmony of men's voices rising together. The Gift that Zaratusra had left Ryou was splitting his perception, like it did every time he listened to someone singing or reciting poetry, any activity where the shape and cadence of the words had just as much import as their meaning. So even as Ryou watched and listened to his lover and the others sing out in alien words that melded into rhyme and rhythm, he could also 'hear' the meaning, penetrating his brain at its own pace and with its own wordings. '...beautiful girl, come to my country-...where the river is flowing-...the sword is sheathed now-...my country is beautiful-...when the grain is ripe...' Ryou did not like the sensation the schism caused, so with some effort he tuned out the meaning and listened only to the melody and the flowing, laughing words.

Then suddenly- Ryou didn't see what happened, but right in the middle of the third verse Romrama leapt clear. The swords clanged together disharmoniously as the sword bearers looked up and around in surprise. Romrama stumbled forward, fortunately uninjured and laughing along with the rest of the boisterous cheering crowd.

"Give the kid some beer!"

"No, don't give him any, he's drunk already!"

"Hey, Romrama, are you that clumsy with a sword?!!"

"No, no, how agile he is! See, his father was a goat!"

Romrama gave the last speaker the double-fingered gesture which Ryou knew full well by now was the Assyrian bird. Then Dionysodoros cleared his throat so loudly it could be heard clear over all the noise, and the men toned it down with sideway glances at the log.

"Doesn't anyone ever get injured?" Ryou asked weakly.

"Hardly ever," said Darius, idly testing the warmth of his wine with a finger. "You don't do it if you don't know how. Besides, they keep a couple of old blades the blacksmith has given up on for that purpose, and wear proper sandals. I used to do it barefoot."
"You? You used to do that?"

"Oh hell, by the time I was sixteen there wasn't any idiotic risky thing I hadn't done," Darius snorted. "I forbid them from taking too many chances while we’re at war. Beyond that, I let them play. Things like that are good for morale, and it makes a stronger unit because you have to trust everyone, the musicians and the sword welders as well as everybody else who can clap out of turn and throw your rhythm. But mainly it's a good way for young dogs to show off," he added with a tolerant look in the direction of the next dancer who’d taken Romrama's place. "In this instance, they’re showing off for you."

Ryou almost spilled the wine he'd been finishing. "Me?!"

Darius looked surprised at Ryou's reaction. Then he smiled and leaned forward until he was talking into Ryou's ear, which didn't help Ryou's sudden struggle with his composure. "You have no idea, do you. Look at it through their eyes. There's rumors all over the Alliance about you already. It's said you fearlessly charged into camp two days ago as if you were going to attack it single-handedly and fully expected to win."

"Well actually-"

"Yeah, I know. Trust me, I know. Hearsay carries enough crazy things about me, so now it's your turn," said Darius wickedly, his shoulder warming Ryou's. "As every man in the army is now ready to swear, having heard the truth of it from the friend of the friend of his cousin who was on guard duty that day and not even all that drunk at the time, after your thunderous arrival you stalked up the hill to Terentius's praetorium and ordered him to send out the Hounds to help me. Your eyes may have shot lightning bolts at this point."

"Oh good grief."

"Rand, Leyam's signet-bearer, immediately mounted a rescue party of twelve-score men on your word alone. They charged out, cut to pieces the hundreds of enemies I had not yet defeated by myself, so on and so forth. And that was just the start. The next day you were sent to oversee the battle from a height above the city, where you made the sun stand still to give us the victory in an hour."

Ryou buried his face in his hand, to stop from laughing or groaning or maybe both. Darius chuckled against his shoulder, obviously enjoying this.

"Then it was revealed that you were a powerful magian who'd foiled a secret plot to exile me to the Void and the Furies. On hearing the trumps of victory, you broke through the Veil to appear before me and- well, rumor didn't get the next bit all that wrong, though it embellished it with lyrical words neither of us would ever say, and it didn't elaborate on what happened on the bed afterwards."

This time Ryou did groan. "You're kidding me."

"I may be exaggerating a little, but not by much."

Ryou took his hand away and looked around the camp as discreetly as he could. "Do you think they, um, mind?" he asked before he could properly reflect on the question.

Darius snorted. "If there's a man amongst them who minds his commander getting laid, be it with Anza Dahak himself, let him come forward. I'll teach him a little dance with swords that are not blunt."

Ryou had by then remembered that this world had a very different perception of men sleeping
together. So he was reassured on that front. Now he just had to worry about this perception of being
some godlike figure with the power to bend space and alter time with a snap of his fingers.

"Most of them have at least as much sense as an ox," said Darius with a hint of an indulgent smile
belying his low evaluation as he watched his men. "They'll know not to believe all the nonsense, not
when they hear so much about me. But that means they don't know who you are, just that you're
different, powerful, and important to me. So like the mutts they are, they're doing this whole song
and dance to show you respect, for my sake and your own, and to make sure you know they're not
to be discounted."

Because Ryou was in the habit of regularly discounting heavily armed soldiers all around him, right.
Ryou dismissed that notion with a shake of his head, but he absorbed the rest...Having Rand walk in
on them twice had only been embarrassing. Suddenly realizing that their relationship was widely
known...that was breathtaking. These men - hell, the whole of the Alliance it seemed - knew he and
Darius were lovers. That nobody seemed to particularly mind was an immediate bonus, but more
than that; Ryou was no longer a random stranger transiting through. His presence, and his
relationship with Darius, had caused ripples of actions and consequences around him all throughout
the day, it was now as real and solid in this world as the bracers around Darius's left arm and Ryou's
right. Yes, it was breathtaking. And a little nerve-wracking, the tension of a salaryman caught in an
unexpected social situation and afraid of making a faux-pas. Beyond whispering in his ear, Darius
had not made any gesture in Ryou's direction that he wouldn't make with any other man. Was there
an etiquette as to how much affection men showed in public, even if everybody knew they were
together? This would be a new situation to Ryou back home; here in the Outlands he was twice as
much at sea. Better play it safe and take his cues from Darius in the meantime.

And talking of cues, this was the third time Darius had stifled a yawn. He'd only had three hours of
sleep last night and had ridden hard all day. Ryou was swaying a little on his log as well, and he did
not particularly want to fall asleep on Darius's shoulder and start drooling in front of the men. Time
for bed.

It seemed Dionysodoros had reached the same conclusion, as he loudly clapped his hands after the
next dancer was finished and the evening quickly wrapped up at that point. Darius shook himself,
went over guard rotations with Dionysodoros and then rejoined Ryou just as the latter was noticing
there were now two bedrolls on the bed of bracken.

"I see we're sharing," Ryou said, trying to hide his surprise. Now he was really confused.

"Yes, no more night vigils for either of us," said Darius, mistaking the meaning of Ryou's comment.
"And a good thing too; Tanatoria is a lot colder than Aksum or Palis once the sun is down, you'll
see. Keep your tunic on, but you can take your shoes off. I'm sure Chamrosh won't mind sleeping at
your feet."

Ryou looked down at the one he thought of as 'the slightly less large dog' which was lounging
nearby, tongue lolling. The hounds had kept pace with them remarkably well despite the ride
alternating between fast walk and stretches of gallops. It was clear these were not cherished pets,
they were used to pulling their weight and making their own way in the army.

Darius, already stripped down to his tunic, stopped near Ryou on way to the pile of blankets. "You
don't mind, right?" he asked in a low voice meant just for the two of them, tilting his chin to indicate
the arrangement.

"Mind? No, not if you don't. I'm sure it'll be warmer that way."

Darius looked at him in silence for a few seconds as if he expected Ryou to add something more
relevant. "I meant that I'm taking the right-handed side," he finally said. "Don't the men in your country...but I guess that wouldn't apply to a magian anyway," he added, rubbing his eyes tiredly, which stopped Ryou from saying 'What do you mean?' "You know there's no disregard intended, of course. My young mutts expect it to be their commander's hand on the sword, while you, my good friend, are not even armed in a way the rest of us dungheads understand."

"It's fine, Darius. Let's get some rest," said Ryou, giving Chamrosh, busy scratching at some fleas, a resigned look. This wasn't the time for explanations. They needed to get some sleep and recover before the next day of hard riding, and if Ryou started to quiz Darius on all the things he did not know about the Outlands, they'd still be sitting here in Tanatoria a week from now. Soon, soon they'd be in Sura. Ryou felt as if he and Darius had been both running full tilt ahead ever since the two of them had first set eyes on each other, but soon it would be time to stop all this traveling, get some real rest and take stock.

Ryou curled up beneath the blankets, suddenly aware of how nippy it was now that Jexen had banked the fire. But he kept his eyes open over the rim of the cover, alternating watching the stars prickle the sky above the line of dark pine trees, and the tail-end of bedtime preparations around the camp. The guards replacing those on the perimeter were bundled up in cloaks with sheepskins thrown over their shoulders. Tanatoria was a northern province, and the road between its border and Sura traveled through a mountain range at high altitude. Of the men who were getting ready to rest, some of the others were also rolling up in pairs; presumably for warmth, unless there were a surprising number of couples in this unit...Ryou couldn't make out many details in the fading light of the fire, but he did pick out Dionysodoros, bedded down on the other side of the embers, amiably shoving at Bareil, one of the youngest of the Hounds who was apparently hogging too many of the blankets. On the left side, Ryou noted, eyes narrowing; Bareil was on the left side, Dio on the right.

He lifted his head a few inches and looked over his shoulder. Darius had Zuru curled up on his side near his knees. His right hand was clear of the blanket and resting straight down his side; his sword, unsheathed and laid on his scabbard, was a couple of inches away from his extended fingers, same as Dionysodoros. Well that rather explained that pre-bedtime discussion, then. Ryou slipped off his glasses and put them on the folded square of Rand's cloak near his head. He did not particularly mind the possible implications of their sleeping arrangements. If they came under attack, it'd definitely be to everyone's advantage to have Darius up and swinging his sword rather than Ryou waving around his table knife.

Darius was already asleep. Ryou felt his own eyelids grow heavy as he watched his lover breathe in and out, slow and deep. The small chain of reasoning and deduction had reminded him that he wasn't completely helpless in this strange land he was becoming a part of; he had his eyes, his powers of observation and his brain, which was still functional and pretty decent by local standards. And he had warriors who didn't mind him being their commander's lover standing watch or sleeping all around him, as well as a dog snoring on his legs, which was considerably warmer and more comforting than Ryou had foreseen...

Ryou was asleep by the time any half-baked conclusion wound its way through his mind.
"That's the island of Mooncrest," said Darius, pointing at a meniscus of green ground parting the waters of a slow, wide river. "It's the border to which Zaratusra himself brought my ancestors several eras ago. That's where I'd hoped to go directly from Essin, if the stars had been on our side instead of intent on dicking around with us. If we'd have come through here instead of the Tanatoria border, we'd have been only a couple of hours away from home."

"It was longer, but it was a nice ride," said Ryou, belying the state of his backside and indeed his whole body. "And you did tell me that the mountain road was the pretty way of approaching Sura."

"I never said 'pretty'. I said it was pleasant enough," said Darius with the dismissive air of one who was more concerned with well-defended rather than easy on the eye. But behind the gruff and tough attitude, Ryou could tell Darius was fiercely proud of his home country and didn't particularly mind this opportunity of showing his land to his lover in its best light in the hopes Ryou would approve of it. It would, after all, be the place Ryou would be staying for awhile, who knew how long.

Darius grumbled another acerbic 'pretty' under his breath and gave a nearby slope of flower-strewn rocks a belittling glance. Ryou only smiled inwardly. 'Beautiful girl, come to my country, where the river is flowing, my land is beautiful, when the grain is ripe...'

As Darius had predicted to Rand, it was now the afternoon of the third day after leaving Essin. They'd made good time along the mountain road yesterday, it was only late afternoon when they'd reached the provincial military outpost maintained at Tanatoria's frontier. The outpost hadn't been much to look at; a collection of tents, dry provisions, fresh horses and a one-room way-station held by an old soldier and his two sons. The three men were peremptorily turned out of their house and put up in the stables in order to afford Darius and Ryou a fireplace, beds and privacy. Ryou had thought it rather high-handed of the Hounds, even if Darius had seen the hosteler well rewarded for the night. But now, with three days and more of fatigue clamping down on his lower back, Ryou was glad he'd gotten a good night's sleep last night. He could look forward to a good bed tonight as well, and a day without traveling tomorrow.

The mountains they'd traveled through defended the northwestern approach of Sura. Their party had in part skirted them and were approaching from the west, riding on the crest of a series of tall foothills. The mountains had scattered small hills throughout the river plain that spread out for hundreds of kilometers before them. The broad, slow rivers Aksosot and Taibor underpinned the land, splitting and weaving around the knolls and plateaus, trailing reeds, trees and rich vegetation in their wake. So different from heavily urbanized Japan...Yet on closer inspection, all of the hills Ryou could see were taken over by agriculture; fields on the bottom slopes, vineyards on the steeper sides, the dry grass of the tops left for goats and sheep to crop. Darius had said it didn't rain much here, in the original Outland Assyria; life was born and concentrated around the rivers. Priests called the Aksosot and the Taibor the two hearts of Assyria (the Hounds and other soldiers called them the Two Tits, which was irreverent but a rather better metaphor when one thought about it...)

Ryou turned his attention from the horizon back to the isle of Mooncrest, surrounded by reeds and bathed in the Taibor. He had a good view of it from this height. The green mound was split in two by a meandering arm of the river that'd been too lazy to go to one side or the other and had opted to go straight through instead. The inn, a grey stone building, was near that gorge, and Ryou could tell with his sixth sense that the bridge that stretched over the water could lead one much further than simply to the other side of the island.

"I see, they use fluvial transport for the trade they bring in along the Paths," said Ryou, studying the
assemblage of pontoons and barges on the downstream side of Mooncrest, protected by the island's
crescent-shaped arms. There was also a wooden bridge spanning the lake to the left-hand side. Their
little group was two hundred meters higher and a couple of kilometers away, still in the foothills;
from here, tiny ants that must be mule caravans advanced across the stone span of the bridge, while
the river was busy with barges like water beetles.

"That's right. Their destination is Sura, we'll see it shortly." Darius was kneeing his horse a little
faster, eyes on the road up ahead.

"Why was the city not built nearer the border?"

"It was at one point, when my ancestors were first led to this land by Zaratusra. But then the
Babylonians and Persians invaded it one time too many, and the ancient King back then said he'd
had enough of paying tribute to keep them away, or getting his capital stolen out from under him at
the risk of becoming some satrapy. He moved the entire city further away to a more defensible spot.
You'll see," Darius added, pointing to where the scouts had stopped up ahead and were waving
excitedly. Darius picked up the pace. Ryou, sitting astride one more docile animal that'd been
especially chosen for him, followed more sedately.

Their party rounded the crest of the foothill and Ryou saw the reason for the excitement.

One of the large mountains to the north extended two foothills like a set of arms encroaching into the
fertile plains, and the Taibor swung by and touched them as it meandered that way in a long arc.
That left a triangle of ground several kilometers wide caught between mountain and river, rippled
with a few domed hills but otherwise flat enough, and that was where that King of old had decided
to relocate Sura.

The city climbed the slopes of the tallest prominence; square buildings that were grey to start with,
and grew bigger and more colorful - ochre, green, blue, yolk-yellow, caramel brown - the higher up
the slope they got. The houses were very close together and colonized the slope with the disorder of
a termite mound. On the flat top of the knoll, however, a ring of fortifications cut off the clutter
below, and the King's palace was in a sumptuous, orderly space of its own, gardens framing a dozen
rectangular buildings, white and yellow walls topped with deep blue tiles.

Much lower down the hill, at the level where the buildings were still drab, a huge stone walkway
higher than the surrounding houses jutted out across the plain, as if providing the city of Sura with a
tail. It connected the hill to the river half a kilometer away. Though Ryou could understand why a
road would be useful, the height of this one was a mystery...Other slimmer walkways, some on
pillars, joined the main hill to other, smaller knolls closer to the mountains. All the way to the
mountains, houses had clumped together in groups of a hundred around tall buildings; temples, Ryou
was ready to bet, knowing more about these ancient towns now. The flat ground between the city
and its offshoots was cultivated, to Ryou's surprise; barley, maybe.

Above everything else stood the most eye-catching structure of Sura: a tall, graceful aqueduct leading
all the way from the mountains, across the plains and to the same level as the palace. Ryou could
guess the course of the water that must flow down the hill as there were tiers upon tiers of small
gardens cascading down the sides, some built on balconies to accommodate more space, all the way
down to ground level.

Ryou's horse had stopped of its own volition as if feeling its rider's need to properly take in this odd
yet magnificent city, its waterway and walkways and bridges and winding hill paths all providing
loops and curves contrasting with the colorful squares heap of its houses.

"It's beautiful," said Ryou, awed for all of five seconds before reason kicked in and he added, "But
why do you need an aqueduct when you've got the river nearby? Couldn't you divert some of the water?"

Darius smiled faintly as if he'd expected something that prosaic from his lover. "The Taibor floods yearly. Not as badly as the Aksosot, but bad enough. It can reach the foot of the hill, sometimes further. It's great for farmers, not so much for the rest of us. Flood season always brought disease in the old days. At that time, we did not have enough people to spread out as far as we do now. Whenever we tried, Namtar would descend upon us and strike us with sicknesses that would wipe out any expansion. Then several hundred years ago, King Qelbarri, called The Builder, had a dream sent to him by Hygiea. Under Her guidance he built the aqueduct, as well as the current palace and the Walk of Ashur. That's what we call the big walkway. Since then, Blessed Hygiea's had Her hand over our heads, and Namtar had to go plague somebody else."

Darius said all that with the straightforward candor of one who'd actually talked with those two deities personally and heard it all from them. Superstition and faith both had a large place in his mental makeup, Ryou had long since realized; it didn't stop Darius from cursing the Gods quite vilely when they put obstacles in his way, of course, but that was all part of his relationship with them. In Darius's mind, the version he'd recounted was a factual history. Ryou's skepticism suggested King Qelbarri had simply seen what aqueducts could do for population growth in Imperial towns and had decided to adopt the same approach. But the aqueduct idea sounded undoubtedly better when brought to the Assyrian King through the intervention of a Goddess rather than borrowed from another empire which was already being seen as something of a rival at the time.

"Come on," said Darius, though he didn't move right away either. He was studying the home city he hadn't seen in over half a year of campaigns as if newly appreciating it through Ryou's eyes. Finally the two dogs near his horse whined, eyes fixed on their destination, and Darius turned and gestured. "Come on, boys, let's go bunk down before night falls and the foxes start yapping. More than three barks bring bad dreams," he explained for Ryou's benefit.

The troop moved down the hill at a slant, then they followed a swell of land rising twenty meters or so above the Taibor, half a Roman mile from the river; a paved road that stayed dry even during floods, presumably. Though they were alternating walks and gallops, they still felt like they were crawling across the massive plains beneath the large sky, its horizon crowned on Sura's side by the mountain range, the Malakel. The more they descended, the more the heat, already considerable, became more humid and oppressive. Most of the Hounds took off their tunics and shirts and rode around in nothing but the thick belts and padded skirts warriors wore for protection. Ryou would have been tempted to imitate them, but that would mean unwinding himself from the sling arrangement Jexen had constructed for him to keep his right arm immobilized against his body. It was a clever setup that allowed Ryou to free his arm with one jerk of the elbow if he needed to make an emergency twopronged grab for his saddle's pommel. Ryou liked the arrangement a lot, it kept him stable on his horse and his arm from hurting too much. And if the idea of having his healing bones flopping around wasn't deterrent enough, the sunshine roasting his neck would do it.

Darius leaned over in the saddle and draped a scarf he'd gotten out of someone's backpack over Ryou's shoulders and then lifted it like a shawl over his head. "It's not always this hot. It's the season before the flood. It'll break soon."

"Yeah," muttered someone in the back of their small group. "Right now it's like riding in Nusku's crotch-piece." The resulting snickers were muffled when Dionysodoros gave the tail end of the troop a Look over his shoulder.

Since they were arriving via dry land rather than by boat, they were riding towards the spot where the foothills met the Taibor. A thick wall and a stronghold had been built at that strategic position,
forbidding the entrance into the valley beyond. A smaller fort matched it on the other side of the river, with siege equipment to pepper with stones and fire shot any force invading by boat. Walls stretched further up into the steep foothills, presumably at key strategic points, and there were other fortifications directly around Sura as well (the hill-city itself was called Sura, Darius told Ryou, the lesser settlements were Sura-Upan, Sura-Qelbar, Sura-Higezandu etc). Another stronghold could be seen in the distance at the other corner of the valley where the foothills arched back to once more meet the Taibor before the river continued on its journey through the plains.

"The closest fort is The Ox Gate, where merchandise from the Paths of Zaratusra is checked and levied," Darius explained when they slowed once more to a walk, their horses moving side by side. "The furthest one downstream is the Ram's Gate." There was a port at the spot halfway through the valley where the walkway, the Walk of Ashur, touched the river. The Taibor's flow was so slow and lazy that boats could be poled up the river to Mooncrest as well as down. Two of them were passing by at the moment, the breeze over the water bringing the Hounds the echoes of a faint rhythmic chant.

Ryou measured the arc of the river, the stretch of flat grass where no trees grew near the Taibor, and the location of the Ox Gate and its walls. "The water rises that high? All the way up to the fortifications?"

"And around them too, at times."

"But that'd mean attackers could bypass the fort by boat during the flood season. Aren't you at risk of invasion then?"

Darius gave him an odd look. "Inder keep us from an enemy crazy enough to attack us during the floods. Don't say such unlucky things. The last man alive to drag himself to our walls would unleash every plague upon us. They might make it past the river walls and gates," Darius added more prosaically. "But the water's not deep enough for heavy fleets. The whole plain is marshy during the month of the floodtide and ebb. People touched by the shaking sickness get ill again, and an invading army couldn't move for the muck. Sura itself is on dry ground unless the flood is particularly bad, and then the first tier of houses get their feet wet. We call those Seasons of Nammu. They're a bad omen. Some very bad years follow them, disease, war, famine. It happened the year after the former King was killed."

Ryou went hmmm absently before abruptly remembering that this was Darius's father they were talking about. Darius himself had said it without any particular inflection though, only as proof of what he advanced. People in the Outlands tended to talk of death as a fact of life rather than a tragedy.

A walkway of bricks and gravel rose from river-level to halfway up the fortifications of the Ox Gate. The bottom part of the fortress was solid embankment so that it could resist the rising floods and carry the living quarters of the fort above water level. The gate into the fortress looked appropriately formidable. A group of soldiers on horseback waited there, presumably for them. Darius's advanced scouting party was with them. Ryou took a deep breath as discreetly as he could, tension climbing. Riding with the small group of Hounds, whose names he was starting to know, had been...controllable. Sura, Darius's home, was only an hour away at most, and the future with all its complexities was now as real and solid as the Ox Gate itself.

This was really brought home when the officer in well-crafted iron armor and plumed helm saluted Darius with a crisp motion and said, "Lord Ghan. My hand beneath your foot. I've sent news of your arrival. It is good to have you back in the capital with the wreath of victory in your hand."

Oh boy, thought Ryou as all the other men saluted respectfully, a synchronous clap of hands brought
Darius exchanged a few words with the officer, addressing him and a few of the soldiers by name; he had this amazing ability to remember faces and details. Ryou, phasing out on his horse, found his mind split between worries of the indeterminate future and more immediate expectations of a warm meal, a bath, a good bed and no more horses.

"Tired?" Darius asked him privately, rejoining his side with a twitch of the reins. The Ox Gate troops were all going to ride them to Sura it seemed. Their officer, Talix, was ahead. Ryou caught a quick, inquisitive glance his way, but then Talix was once more all incurious proficiency in getting the show on the road.

"I'm fine," Ryou answered, which earned him a soft snort from his lover.

"It'll be getting late by the time we get to Sura, and I have to take care of the men and talk to Leyam. I'll leave you in Jexen's care when we get there, okay? We can show up in court tomorrow when we're both rested."

"Sounds good," Ryou answered, because 'Oh thank god' would have sounded a little pathetic.

Since it wasn't flood season, they rode across the plain straight towards Sura instead of taking the paved road that ran alongside the hills to one of the walkways. They were passed without question through one of the gates around the city. Then they were climbing haphazard streets rising sharply up the hill. The place looked deserted to start with; the inhabitants were eating and resting in the shade and would come out later to take advantage of the coolness of the evening to conduct the last business of the day. But word spread ahead of their group. People started to gather alongside the climbing narrow road, kids running to keep up with the horses, men saluting, women shouting welcomes and waving their red-colored palms and bangle-laden arms. Cheers started. Ryou tried to take in the multi-colored houses, the bright awnings, the signs of businesses and homes and people...the heat and fatigue was making the scene more and more dreamlike. Ryou would not remember getting up the hill later. At some point Jexen and Dionysodoros moved forward to ride on either side of him, isolating him a little from the noise and the crowds who were focusing on Darius, riding with Talix up ahead.

Ryou came out of his trance when the road flattened out and led them to the last line of Sura's defenses, the cream-colored stone wall he'd seen ringing the palace.

Jexen, who seemed to have adopted Ryou already, pointed at an opening cut into the wall with two gates, one of wood and one of iron, both lifted in welcome. "That's not the main gate," he said, leaning over to talk to Ryou over the clamor. The cheering crowds were being outbid in the noisy welcome department by soldiers, gathering in the nearby plaza and on the top of the wall, all shouting victory slogans. "The big gate is to the east. This is the Women's Gate."

"Oh?" Ryou looked up at the thick stone arch above his head. "Why is it called that?"

"...I don't know. Hey, why's it called the Women's Gate?" shouted Jexen back at Bareil riding behind them - one of only five Assyrians in the troop. But Bareil just shrugged in ignorance.

"Since we're part of Lord Ghan's private guard, we're privileged with rooms right here in the royal barracks," Jexen continued, pointing at something Ryou couldn't see for all the horses and soldiers and general commotion around them. "Otherwise we'd be staying lower down the slope, or at the Ox Gate."

"I see," said Ryou and wondered how many times he'd said that today. It was funny, neither Jexen...
nor Dio were from Sura, but they both looked pleased when Ryou showed interest or appreciation in
the city.

Finally Ryou was allowed to get off the bloody horse and walk around on stiff legs. One of the
Hounds, Hamado, silently took his reins, allowing him to join Darius's side. Darius pointed at a
building nearby and started to say something about it when he was interrupted by a servant who
knelt before him; actually knelt on the ground in his white linen knee-length skirt, a hand out before
him in the gesture of fealty.

"My pardon, Lord Ghan. I have been asked to send for you. You are to appear before King Leyam
in the Hall of Ashur as soon as you and your party arrive."

Darius looked down at the servant wordlessly for a couple of seconds. Ryou had the intuition his
lover had been caught short by the summons.

"Oh. Now? Well, let me-...what did he say exactly?"

"You and your party, as soon as you arrive," said the servant without hesitation, head still bowed.

Darius rubbed his face, his hand muffling a muttered, "Bugger. Okay," he said out loud, "change of
plans. Dio, you deal with things here, I'll come later to square it away with the barrack's master.
Ryou, I'm afraid 'your party' means you too."

Ryou was still owlishly watching the servant, waiting for the latter to move. It took him a moment to
react, and then he had to run to catch up to Darius, walking through a path of trees in blue glazed
ceramic planters as high as his head. Chamrosh and Zuru were trotting on ahead as if they already
knew where they were going.

"Wait, wait," Ryou said as he reached Darius's side. They were alone now, the servant was still
kneeling behind them and Talix and Dionysodoros were talking together, heading away towards the
left. "You want me to meet your- the King like this?" Darius hadn't had that many spare clothes; not
many people in the Outlands did, clothes were expensive, oft-repaired items tailored to the wearer.
Ryou was dressed for traveling in the tunic he'd taken out of Sezerena's wardrobe, grubby from three
days on the road. Darius wasn't all that much better, though at least he was in armor so it wasn't quite
as obvious.

"We've been summoned," said Darius with a practical shrug. "And anyway..." He gave Ryou an
oddly sly glance from the corner of his eyes. "I've been looking forward to the two of you meeting."

"You mentioned that before. Why exactly-"

"Just don't be surprised at anything that happens," Darius added in a murmur. Well-dressed people
were gathered around the entrance of the building they were approaching, bowing to Darius and then
giving Ryou curious looks. "It's going to be...There's reasons. You'll understand. Don't say anything
unless he asks you a direct question. You'll be fine," he added with a quick pat on Ryou's shoulder.
Then he schooled his features and picked up the pace, striding past a group of heavily painted
women as if he hadn't even noticed them.

Their destination was an L-shaped building at the end of the garden's path. Stairs led up to a large
patio of twisted columns painted in primal colours. Its roof protected two enclaves on either side,
inhabited by statues twice the height of a man. Incense, plates of offerings on low tables and the
solemn look of the stylized statues suggested they were objects of worship. Household Kamis or
possibly dead ancestors, Ryou automatically assumed, but Darius strode through the entrance
between them without a glance their way.
It turned out the building had only one large room and one function, a hall for feasts and celebrations. The other smaller arm of the L-shape, without patios, gods and columns, must be the kitchens.

Two guards stationed on either side of the entrance saluted as Darius passed, but there was no other announcement. The hubbub in the room diminished only by installments as Darius walked the length of the rectangular hall, Ryou at his heels. People - all men, to Ryou's surprise - were seated on low chairs or half reclining on couches, with low tables and servants holding plates here and there. It seemed Darius and Ryou were interrupting a banquet. Cushioned benches, chairs and couches lined three of the walls of the room. There was nothing in the middle bar a magnificent mosaic of a man, ever so slightly cross-eyed, lifting a sectioned winged circle in one hand and a moon symbol in the other. All kinds of unidentifiable animals gamboled around him. The tiny tiles composing the winged circle were picked out in gold, the moon in silver and gems; it was magnificent. Darius strode across it without a glance, heading towards the fourth side of the room. The dining area there was elevated on a three-step dais covered in furs and rugs, with one elegantly carved low chair in the middle. The seat was adorned in gold, a throne despite its lack of height.

"GHAN! Finally!" shouted a figure standing in the center of the dais.

Ryou's mind faltered to a stop.

All the courtiers had gotten to their feet and now formed a respectful half circle around the space Darius and Ryou occupied before the throne, in front of which stood- Ryou resisted the urge to rub his eyes - in front of which stood a magnificently dressed six-foot-tall drag queen.

"Approach!" cried the man on the dais. There were other men and a few women around him, seated on the floor or kneeling. They were dressed in short tunics and soft pants with a lot of skin and jewelry showing, but Ryou couldn't pay the pageantry much attention when the King of Assyria commandeered all of it.

He was a well-built man of a good height, though his sandals with thick wooden soles made it hard to tell how artificial that impression was. And he was wearing a dress. Oh yes, a dress. Ryou's grasp on period clothing was still wobbly, but he knew enough to say with confidence that this man was dressed as a woman. A sweeping rectangle of rich green, tasseled in gold and decorated with jeweled pendants, wrapped around his lower body and was cinched in with a golden belt to form a floor-length skirt. The parting was artfully situated so that Ryou could see a long, hairless leg with the aforementioned sandals and a gold brace like a garter around his thigh. His midriff was bare, and though Leyam wasn't as muscular as his half-brother, he did have a faint outline of pectorals above which he sported a green bolero-type top that struggled to suggest cleavage he was otherwise quite devoid of. The top had tassels that swished around as he gestured, counterpointed by bangles on his wrists and a magnificent necklace around his throat. If there was anything about this outfit that might have been ambivalent as to gender - and there wasn't, because it already clashed and fought tooth and nail with the more sober knee-length tunics every other man present wore - then the way Leyam's face was painted was certainly the tipping point. He was clean-shaven to start with, which put him and Ryou in a small minority, and then the heavy make-up went and put Leyam in a minority all of his very own. It wasn't ceremonial, as someone familiar with Kabuki might have considered; it was entirely decorative, from the solid green on his eyelids extending all across his face in a bar, to the exaggerated doe eyes in kohl and the clashing red of the lips. The elaborate coif of red curls that rose on his head and fell down his shoulders to his middle back was as fake as a wig could look and not be made of plastic.

No, there was no possible doubt about it. The King of Assyria was dressed in drag.

In Ryou's stunned mind, the memory of an insult he'd heard a few times bubbled up. Leyam, the
Bitch King. Ryou could finally see where that was coming from, though now that he thought back on it, the term had always been used with disquieted or spiteful overtones rather than derision...

Darius had obeyed the command to approach the throne but now he stopped, took a step back and gently dragged Ryou forward by the elbow. Ryou started at the contact that jogged him out of his daze, and he glanced at his lover...who had a small, private smirk on the corner of his lips.

"You should see your face," Darius mouthed in a near-silent whisper. The bastard who'd failed to warn Ryou that his brother was a cross-dresser was enjoying himself.

Ryou let himself be led forward to a meter before the dais and stopped where the pressure from Darius's fingers told him to. Cham and Zuru immediately went down on their haunches as if they’d received the same signal, tongues lolling and not at all intimidated by the grandness of the room which would have, in most people's opinions, precluded the presences of dogs here in the first place. Ryou's gaze was bouncing around, down to the floor out of respect and back up again with the inevitability of a train wreck. He did notice that the King was looking at him, particularly at the hand Darius had on his arm, and the expression behind the heavy makeup and the artificial smile was completely unreadable.

Darius took one last step forward by himself and went down on one knee, one hand flat on the first step of the dais. "My king," he said, head bowed.

Ryou stood there, waiting for any indication he was to do the same, but the king was no longer looking at him, nobody was. He made a deep bow just in case and then waited to see what was going to happen next.

King Leyam made a magnificent turn a catwalk model would have envied, sending the skirt sweeping out and around as he stepped back and sat down once more on the throne. A boy who could be no more than fourteen, dressed in a short skirt, body paint, jewels and nothing else, leaned forward to slip a gilded stool barely two inches high beneath the king's sandals. His master lifted a hand and beckoned with a gesture of studied grace. "Come, Ghan, come here. Come to my lap."

Lap...?

Darius stood and walked up the steps to kneel again at Leyam's knee. There was the oddest half-smile on his face, matching the intensity in his eyes as he looked up at his brother.

Leyam's hand fell to the dark hair and scratched. The disks in Darius's hair clinked. "So, my faithful dog, did you hunt down my enemies for me?"

"And ripped their throats out," replied Darius immediately.

"So savage, my beast. But it was well done. King Ka, my noble counterpart, has better to do than go around smiting pissant little Imperial lackeys, as do I. Roman wolves who badger our flocks are best left to the shepherd's dog, I always say. Protect the sheep that stray and allow them to return to the bountiful sheltered herd. All is well and good then, as long as they don't step out of line a second time."

With a synchronicity that was pretty creepy, both brothers looked to the left at a small group near the throne. A man at the center stiffened and paled, then he quickly handed his cup to a kneeling servant and bowed.

There was a tense little silence in the large room. Grown men looked away as the king's painted eyes finally left their initial target and swept the assembly. To Ryou, fine-tuned to gestures, the depth and
timing of the bows beneath that gaze spoke of a wary respect and high regard; this ridiculous man in the center of the room commanded from them the dread and deference accorded to Emperors. The contrast between what Ryou was looking at and what the Assyrians seemed to be seeing was pretty stark.

"And this is?" Leyam asked, flicking a finger at Ryou. His other hand was still on Darius's head.

Ryou was instantly the focus of every gaze, him and his dusty clothes, dirty hair and unshaven face. Great. Ryou, face set, bowed with the same gesture as the rest of the Assyrians, with a tad more depth thrown as apology for his appearance.

"This is Ryou, his patronym is Ujiie," Darius said, actually getting the pronunciation right this time. "He is from a distant country. When I was ambushed shortly before the Essin siege and had to retreat alone, Ryou selflessly risked his life to come to my aid and assisted me in my return to the front line."

"With nothing to gain?" asked the King in a tone that suggested he knew damn well what was going on, before making a sweeping regal gesture. "Then he shall be clothed in purple and receive ten talents of silver with my stamp. Tupilla, take note of that."

"Yes, my King," said a stony-faced man sitting cross-legged a meter away from the throne. He had a portable scribe's table on his knees and he'd started making prints on a clay tablet as soon as Leyam had finished speaking.

Ryou bowed again, since he didn't know what else to do. Should he kneel? It was hard to remember that this man had the power of life and death over anyone in this country including Ryou himself.

"You are welcome back amongst us, Lord Ghan," said the king in a flowery formal way. He'd stood up in a silvery shower of clinks and tings from his bangles. "Let this be a day to rejoice. Assyria and the Alliance are once more triumphant. Tomorrow night we will hold a feast in honor of Ashur, Inder and the Hound of Assyria who brought down the city of Essin. Drink, my friends, and hold your cups high in praise of our returning champion. I myself shall retire for the night. In this heat, the only thing a man can do is lie down and eat fresh fruit," the king added, reaching back without looking to run a finger through the hair of the boy who'd brought him the footstool.

And that was it. The king made a theatrical wave over his head, and every person in the room immediately bowed, Ryou a second after the rest. By the time he looked up, King Leyam Sirrian was walking out a door behind the dais, preceded by two massive guards and followed by a gaggle of young, beautiful servants. Leyam's hand was on the shoulder of the boy he'd touched a minute before, his other arm wrapped around the waist of a scantily clad girl not a day over sixteen.

Ryou was almost as shocked by Leyam's departure in the middle of his own banquet as he was by the youth of his entourage and the innuendo as broad as a barn. It was hard to believe this person could be related to Darius. Well, no, it wasn't that they were related that was surprising, every family had its black sheep; it was the way Darius spoke of his brother with affection and respect. Cultural gap aside, Ryou did not think he and Darius could see things this differently. But what exactly was all this then-

"Come on," said Darius, rejoining Ryou. "The audience is over."

"Yes, of course." Then Ryou took his mouth off automatic and focused a bit more on the here and now. "Wait, didn't you need to talk to him some more?"

"Of course, but not in the middle of the royal court," Darius murmured for Ryou's ears alone.
Ryou flashed a quick look around the room, taking in the faces of those turning towards them. A lot of artificial smiles of welcome, a lot of hidden thoughts behind them. The man who'd been grilled by the king's jab earlier was talking to three others, stony features not entirely hiding a grim look. There was a little island of space around him and his cronies; even to a brand new foreigner, some of the currents here were obvious, while others would be invisible until the last unfortunate minute. It was like the finance sector's Big Ten summit, thought Ryou, only this time the term 'cut-throat' was probably not a metaphor.

A strong hand on Ryou's elbow was moving him in the direction of the exit through which Leyam had left. "Come on, I want to introduce you to my brother."

"Didn't you just do that?" Ryou muttered.

"No, you just met the Bitch King of Assyria," said Darius in that near-whisper and with that smirk again. "Now we're going to go meet my brother Leyam."

'Just don't be surprised at anything that happens', Darius had told him. Right, it was obvious there'd been more to all that than met the eye. Ryou set aside all judgment for now and followed his lover, making their way through the chatting, scented, curly-bearded throng.
Chapter 24

As they made their way around the dais to the rear door, Darius and Ryou were intercepted by a good number of men who wanted to talk briefly with the former, congratulating him on the battle’s outcome and asking for some of his time the next day. Darius got out of each conversation with a minimum of time and courtesy, which nobody seemed to be surprised or too offended at, but it still took the pair twenty minutes to reach the exit.

"Inder's balls, that's better," Darius muttered, giving the room behind them one last look over his shoulder as if expecting the whole pack to follow him, tugging at the corner of his tunic. "I love Sura, I swear, but five minutes back here and I want to go to war again. Ashur's Hall is one of the public places. From here on out, it'll be quieter. Cham, Zuru," he added, looking down at the dogs. The pair perked up at the sound of their master calling their name. "Home. Wait there."

The two hounds turned and trotted off to the right. Darius didn't watch them go, he led Ryou straight ahead to a paved path that led off between palm trees. Peacocks strutted around, yelping when Ryou got too close, and birds and insects sang in the foliage as the sun sank slowly. The heat, oppressive in Ashur's Hall despite all the servants waving fans around, was bearable in the shade.

Darius detoured around an elegant courtyard ornamented with a fountain burbling a bare two feet high. The palace proper started there, taller than the previous structure. It was plainer, without colonnades or painting, though the yellow stone carved with regular symbols had a sober beauty of its own. The palace of Kings was older than the feasting hall, Ryou gathered, and from what Darius had said, it had stood here in one form or another for thousands and thousands of years.

The hallways inside reminded Ryou of Essin; tiled, rich with paintings, mosaics and occasional tapestries. And quite empty except for guards and servants who bowed to Darius in passing.

"Here," said Darius. They were in front of an entrance decorated with mosaics and alabaster pillars. Through it they entered a little lobby opening onto a balcony on one side. Cedars waved in the breeze outside, a cool rustle.

A broad-chested man stood in the center of the balcony as if he'd been waiting for them there all along. Entirely clean-shaven, even his hair and eyebrows, he was dressed in a calf-length skirt. He was bare above the waist bar a decorated chestpiece like an overgrown necklace that hung down his back, over his shoulders and past his pectorals; a style that would have worked better on him if he wasn't getting a little pudgy. He bowed to Darius, bowed a little less low to Ryou and then clapped his hands twice. The door behind him opened. A young man and an equally young woman passed the lintel. They were dressed the same as the man who'd summoned them - even the girl, her breasts bare. The simpler designs of their chestpieces must indicate some kind of ranking system, Ryou surmised. They were carrying shallow bronze bowls and pitchers with the neutral, courteous smiles of waiters approaching their designated table.

"Here, sit," said Darius, pointing to a long low bench that ran the length of the lobby opposite the balcony. "And take off your shoes."

The thick-set man, a majordomo it seemed, picked up their footwear. Ryou was ready to swear he caught a disparaging look at his own worn shoes, bequeathed to him by some soldier from Darius's Hounds. The two young servants poured water into the bowls, knelt and held them out. Ryou followed Darius's example and washed his face and hands. Then the boy and girl leaned down and washed the guests' feet.
"Do you wish for a change of clothes, Lord Ghan?" asked the steward after placing their shoes in a little cubby near the entrance. His voice was surprisingly high for his frame. "And for your noble companion as well, of course."

"Let it rest, Sharmo," said Darius with a heavy look. "The king will be fine with us the way we are; he's seen soldiers fresh off the road before."

"I am sure you are correct, Lord Ghan," said Sharmo a tad too obsequiously, then he pushed open the doors with a deep bow.

Darius strode through. "Ball-less git," he growled under his breath as they reached the end of a three-meter corridor. "Always looks like he can smell dog shit when I'm around. Ah, good evening, Nicodeme. Your father sends his greetings."

They'd entered an antechamber filled with long couches and cushions. A couple of the girls who'd been with the king earlier were sitting near the window, playing a board game with thick pegs placed in holes. Next to them a young boy was dozing on a pile of pillows. The fourteen-year-old the King had seemed to favor earlier was sitting on a chair by the door. He got up and bowed to Darius, then he grinned as he lifted his head. "Is he coming back soon?"

"Hell if I know, it depends where the master of all of us sends him next. He should have arrived in Aksum by now, and I know he's got business in Kaides after that. Can we go in? He's with me," he added when Nicodeme's eyes flickered over Ryou. It hadn't been the look of a bed-toy, rather the sharp gaze of a soldier on patrol, whatever his age and clothing. That expression on his square face collided in Ryou's mind with the mention Darius had made of the kid's father being in Aksum and then having business in Kaides. Ryou opened his mouth to ask, but he wasn't sure if he should...If this boy was truly Rand's son, considering Rand's former profession, well-

"If that's Ghan, let him come in already," someone shouted from the other side of the door.

Nicodeme immediately stood aside and let them pass.

The interior of the huge room was draped in gaudy veils and brocaded tapestries strung between gilded pillars, turning the space into a maze. The few furnishings and decorations Ryou could see were even richer than in Essin, though displayed a lot more haphazardly; a golden statue of an armored man in the stiff style of Assyria, shoved against a pillar; small marble works in the more fluid and realistic style of the Greeks, perched on a box rather than on a nearby wooden table full of maps; a splendid necklace dangling rakishly from a warrior's spear in a frieze carved out of a nearby wall inset with alabaster.

"Finally," someone muttered, ducking under a tapestry.

King Leyam had discarded the dress. He was now barefoot, clothed in a stiff linen skirt - the kind men wore - and an embroidered brown silk vest as long as the skirt, hanging open over his chest, loosely tied with two golden ropes crossed over the abdomen. He still wore the jewelry including the brace on his thigh, but the wig was nowhere to be seen. His real hair, a tawny brown verging on sandy and thinning a little at the temples, was tied sharply back. He walked in with a strong stride full of coiled energy. The only way Ryou would have been sure this was the same man as before was the red stain on his lips and traces of makeup he'd not been able to remove.

"My King-" Before Darius could say another word he was grabbed and subjected to a rough hug that made him stagger. It quickly degenerated into what Ryou, now familiar with the activities of soldiers at rest, could recognize as the start of wrestling match, with the King trying to apply some antique Assyrian version of a noogie. Seeing them side by side and without the high sandals, Ryou realized that Leyam was an inch shorter than his brother. Without the makeup some family
resemblance was finally visible, particularly around the eyes and nose.

"You bloody cur, I thought you'd gone and gotten yourself killed," growled Leyam. "Goddamnit, Darius, what the hell happened-" He broke off when he spotted Ryou.

Darius squirmed out of his brother's hold and gave him a shove. "Let me go and I'll tell you. What do you think I spent three hard days riding for?"

"I see you brought your friend," said Leyam, hands falling back to his side.

"Oh, yeah. Ryou, this brute is my brother Leyam, King of Assyria. Leyam, I already told you who he is."

Ryou bowed.

"Yes," said Leyam, and then he stepped away from his brother and made a refined gesture with the grace of royalty receiving foreign dignitaries. "Welcome to my country, Ryou, if that's how you'd prefer to be addressed."

"Thank you, your majesty."

"Come this way, the both of you. I have something to drink in the back."

Darius headed that way on cue. Ryou waited for the King to precede him, but Leyam gestured him on, so Ryou followed Darius through the labyrinth of veils. Hopefully turning his back on the King of Assyria wasn't some form of lèse-majesté.

Leyam followed him at five paces in silence. Ryou felt a little chill run up the back of his neck that he was hard set to explain.

Off to one side, Ryou glimpsed a bed behind a large hanging tapestry. He was slowly getting an idea of the room's size; it would have easily swallowed his whole apartment and that of his neighbor back in Tokyo. Darius headed towards a table near a large rectangular window a few meters from the bed. The walls here were decorated with figures all bearing symbols and implements to designate which god they represented. Smaller figures, men and women, bowed around them in worship, or else ignored them and sat at tables to eat, walked through the tempera scenes to visit others, slept in beds, partied or indulged in intercourse that was, on closer look, startlingly pornographic. Ryou would have said it was in character for the Bitch King of Assyria, except that the small cracks and the presence of fading in the corners most washed by sunlight indicated they were considerably older than Leyam could be.

"Ryou? Beer or wine? Anything to eat?" Darius asked, hands poised over pitchers. The table was also set with fruit, pastries and bread.

"Oh..." Ryou glanced from the King to the table to Darius. "Whatever you're having."

"What's up with you? Ah, Ashur love you, no need to be tense," he added, squeezing Ryou's shoulder. "Ceremony stays on the other side of those doors back there. You intimidated him with your display earlier, Leyam."

"Did I?" Leyam's eyes flicked from Darius's hand on Ryou's shoulder to Ryou's face, and then he smiled easily. "That is what it's for. But Darius is right, I do not stand on formalities in my bedroom. Protocol would only make the nights complicated, drawn out and way too boring."

From the way Darius snickered, that remark was intended to be faintly lewd. Ryou for his part
produced a polite smile with the practice of one who had entertained drunk CEOs inordinately proud of their store of dirty jokes.

Darius handed him a cup of wine. "Here, this will be much better than anything we ever found on the road."

"Thank you." The wine certainly wasn’t as sour or sedimentous as the stuff Ryou had had to swallow up until now, but his stomach was too knotted with tension and fatigue to enjoy it. He would kill for some green tea at this point...

Leyam didn't drink. He elected to lounge in a low chair, leaning heavily on the leather strap at the back, one knee bent. Even sitting like that, there was a feeling of restless power about the man. Ryou, culturally habituated to the image of rigid royal etiquette at all times, had been as startled by the current trend of informality as he had been by the previous display in the Hall. But even with Leyam half dressed and sitting back in a chair, there was an aura of ironclad self-assurance about the man that said, this is a leader.

"So talk," he said, gesturing at his brother. "Just the first few verses, not the whole epic," he added as Darius took a deep draught of beer.

Darius gave him an acid look over the rim of his cup. "Isn't that what you got from Rand already? I'm sure he sent you a courier the instant I brought him up to speed."

"Yes, but now I want to hear it in your own words."

Darius leaned his thigh against the edge of the table. "Fine, the short of it is, after we trounced Sezerena's forces on the fields of Dessiopian, some men from Kaides approached me with a proposal of mediation. I was going to meet a representative of Essin to see if we could get the city to turn on Sezerena without all this mucking about with a siege. I hate sieges," he muttered into his cup.

"So what happened?"

"We passed the col on that high road, you know, on the frontier. I had fifteen men with me, Dela from Kush riding on my left hand. Rand told me Dela did his job and brought the others home safely in my stead. I want him back, by the way, and I hope he is still hale."

"This man escorted the king's half brother off to Kaides and came back without him, bearing a tale that suggested he'd been hitting the qunubu a bit too heavily. He's lucky to be alive at all," said Leyam measuredly. Yes, thought Ryou, finalizing his conclusions; whether he wore a dress or not, this really was not a man to cross...It was confirmed when Darius gave his king a hard look in return but did not argue the point.

"We passed the col, half expecting some kind of ambush. I knew what Kaides thought of me, for all they're neutral in the Imperium's wars. I'd spread riders ahead and behind. But instead of some armed forces, these three guys appeared right on the road ahead of us."

"Appeared," said Leyam, stressing the word.

"Yeah, they were just standing there, and my scouts hadn't spotted them. They were dressed in white robes and brown over-cloaks with the symbol of the wheel and the wings on their tunics."

Leyam's eyes narrowed. "Per Gathas."

"Yeah. That's just it. A little too much." Darius rubbed his chin. "Sure, when I first saw him, that's what I thought. Actually what I thought was, what the fuck are three Sons of Zaratusra doing in this
godforsaken arsehole of a kingdom. It's only later, while I was recovering, that I started to think...They had their hoods drawn up so that I could barely see their chins, but there was still something...strange about them. There were three of them there with no guards or attendants. I've never seen that in my life. And since when do the Per Gathas take that kind of interest in a dog like me?"

"Good question," said Leyam, absently tapping the leg brace around his thigh with a fingernail. "When we heard the news, Rand came up with two or three reasons why they'd want to put you down, cur. For instance, there was the theory that the Per Gathas have given up their age-old neutrality and have decided to aid the Imperium. Maybe in exchange for Rome no longer building roads. You've sure been a thorn in the Imperial backside in that region. They'd love to make you vanish in a way that'd cause doubt and confusion as to your death, maybe even make people wonder if you're not chained up to a galley somewhere. That's the most widespread and popular rumor going around, and seen as a good reason to take out one of the notable figures that was about to besiege the Imperium's strongest supporter in the Alliance territories. I personally believe it far-fetched, and I will pray to Ashur daily that it remains so, yet it cannot be discarded. But Rand said, and I'll use his exact words, 'Only real idiots would act in such a way while bearing their own crest and then let all the witnesses get away'."

"They didn't all get away," Darius said somberly. "The scouting party doubled back, and they overtook the pricks just as we approached. One of those cocksucker magians did something with his hands, and it was like the air turned into invisible swords. Poreltes the Greek fell, may the Furies leave that goat-banger well alone. So did Maithris and Agonennon, cut right in two like a sausage."

"If the Per Gathas had wanted to, they could have conceivably caused the entire Kingdom of Kaides to disappear back into the Veil," said Leyam, still in the same conversational tone. "And eventually someone would have noticed it was missing. The point is, they let most of your men run away like hares while getting rid of you in the most spectacular way imaginable. There is definitely a reason for such a display; it cannot have been done on a mere whim. If I'd wanted you dead, little brother, had I all the might of the Per Gathas on my side, I would still have opted for something simpler and surer such as a few drops of poison in your beer."

Darius finished his beer in one long draught as if he was making some kind of point.

A faint smile touched Leyam's expression and then was gone again. "So what did these three magians say to you?"

"Nothing much, but then again we were hurtling javelins their way. Our weapons went right through them, though. How's a man supposed to fight that? One of them lifted his arms - let me tell you, we flinched so hard we almost fell off our horses - and shouted at me that this was the judgement for one who broke the age-old laws. He said more, but I couldn't hear, my horse was kicking up a storm. The air was funny, it smelled like hot metal, and it was driving the animals crazy. Even the dogs bolted. So I dismounted to charge the enemy on foot."

"Of course you did," Leyam muttered, rubbing his eyes.

"If I thought they'd let us run away, I'd have taken the chance. But they weren't, that much was obvious," said Darius with a shrug. Ryou wasn't any more surprised than Leyam; he'd seen this side of his lover all the way back in Tokyo. Though Darius played up his reputation as The Beast, he was in fact a calculating warrior, a seasoned commander who would not waste his troops or his own life on a suicide attack unless his back was to the wall. However, if his back was to the wall, he was certainly not going to hesitate...Ryou could just picture the scene behind the blunt words. He could see Darius tossing away the reins, gripping his sword and advancing on the magical maelstrom ahead
of him with a certain grim smile on his face...

"So they opened a rift and shot you through to the Inlands," Leyam concluded.

"Not quite there, but close enough. Then they left me with a friend to play with. The Bher Rajiin."

From Leyam's faint hiss, he'd not had that detail from Rand's account.

"I dispatched the first of her spawn, but the bitch came back and squeezed out another. That's where Ryou comes in. You should have seen him, he-"

"I heard something of the rest. We'll discuss the epic of your Inland adventures later. Let's stay on these three who tried to kill you. What do you think?"

This was addressed to Ryou, completely unexpectedly. "Me?"

"Yes, you," said the King with an amused smile. "You're a magian, Rand informs me. Did Darius tell you this tale before?"

"Yes," Ryou said cautiously. "He told me last night when we stopped to sleep at the outpost."

"Did he?" Leyam murmured, resting his chin in his palm, elbow planted on the chair's armrest. "There was a time he wouldn't bother with talk at all in those circumstances, let alone sleep."

"Hey," said Darius sharply, looking up from the apple he was cutting. He was frowning a warning, with maybe a touch of defensiveness thrown in.

Leyam smirked and shook his head. "We'll let the past lie, shall we, dog? Though it's refreshing to see you actually care about it for a change; I sometimes think you enjoy scaring people a bit too much."

"You also enjoy your games a bit too much, my King," Darius answered steadily, cutting the apple in two with one sharp gesture.

"He only calls me My King in private when he's mad at me," said Leyam for Ryous's benefit. "So, Inlander, what do you think of the incident that led you to cross my brother's path?"

"It sounds like misdirection," Ryous said, a conclusion Darius had reached long before and which Ryous had agreed with when they'd discussed it last night. He wasn't sure why he was being asked. "Someone wanted you to think the Per Gathas had acted against you."

"They certainly wanted something, if they removed my right hand in a way any gapped-toothed crone of Hecate could determine was done via powerful magic."

"Right."

"They weren't very subtle, but why should they be? Most people think I'm a frivolous wastrel with his brain in his cock and his cock into just about everything." Leyam mused. To his left, Darius snorted around a mouthful of apple. "Part of their plan certainly went off without a hitch. Your common soldier is both gullible and talkative. The men who came back spread the story before Rand could put a stopper on them. Rand was his usual reliable self; squashed as many rumours as he could and made sure that look-alike Ionian filled Ghan the Beast's boots to avoid a lot of people panicking. But of course he couldn't fake out Terentius and the rest of the high command. They were getting distinctly nervous at Essin. Rand had to delay an important trip to stay there and keep them calm. As for myself, my brother, the person I trust most in the kingdom, vanishes and was beset by monsters.
This might make even a wise man forgo reason and jump to conclusions... How fortunate he ran into you. I cannot thank you enough for bringing him back to me," the King finished with a pleasant look at Ryou.

"He helped me survive here, I was a great burden to him," Ryou pointed out with inbred civility.

"And any thoughts about that attempt at misdirection?"

"...What thoughts?"

"Leyam, Ryou's an Inlander and he's got natural talent to rival Zaratusra himself," Darius interjected. "He doesn't know that what happened to me was practically impossible except for someone from the Per Gathas."

"The Per Gathas, yes, as well as some exceptionally talented magian that are rumoured to exist on the fringes of the Outlands," Leyam agreed, nodding wisely.

Ryou's mouth went dry as he suddenly glimpsed a nasty angle to this entire conversation. But surely- Darius had surely vouched for Ryou by his very presence, and Leyam had treated him quite cordially in turn-

Leyam was looking at him brightly, expecting some kind of response. Ryou's mind fumbled over what might be the least suspicious thing he could say, and then fumbled some more as he realized this in itself would be suspicious.

"Um...If only a few people could do that, that'd give them another reason to blame the Per Gathas," he said, hoping his pause hadn't been too long. "They'd be easy to trace otherwise."

"I hope they are, because Rand's looking for them and I do really want him back before the floods," said Leyam, getting to his feet. "Brother, I have another meeting right now. We will continue this conversation later tonight. Show your new friend to the noble quarters and then for the love of every god in our pantheon, go and take a bath. You smell like the rear end of a horse."

"Don't you start. I already got the treatment from Sharmo."

"He's supercilious and overzealous, but in this case I think his sense of smell was the worst offended. Go. Ryou, I'll leave you in my brother's, ah, care," Leyam said with a regal nod and a leer that clashed together. Ryou made some kind of polite noise in return and got out of the royal presence as quickly as he could.

"These are the noble quarters where people of the royal household have rooms," said Darius with a casual wave at the sumptuous surroundings. "I use it for the space and the balneum, though I'd have been just as glad to get a room in the barracks. I don't have the retinue to fill this place, and nobody else lives here at this point in time."

Ryou nodded absently at what Darius was saying. His lover hadn't made any comment about their interview with the king. Apparently he'd not noted anything out of whack with Leyam's behavior. Neither had Ryou exactly; Leyam had been friendly in the formal way of royalty. There was nothing odd there, but for some reason Ryou was remembering Darius saying, a good while back, 'you and my brother will get along'. Ryou found himself doubting it. He didn't think anybody got along with Leyam, not in a manner of getting close, other than Darius.
And all this didn't explain the thing with the dress...

Ryou had walked by walls covered in paintings and mosaics, tapestries and fretted wooden screens, without paying too much attention to his surroundings until Darius led him out a short portico to a room tiled from floor to ceiling, and started to strip.

"We're seriously taking a bath now?"

Darius raised an eyebrow. "Royal order. Besides, he's right, we probably do need it. It was a long ride. Will you need the lights of a priest for that?" he added, pointing at Ryou's arm.

Ryou had almost forgotten about it. He'd perfected the ability of riding one-handed the past three days which, for a man of twenty-first century Japan who'd not seen a horse outside of TV this time a month ago, wasn't too shabby in Ryou's opinion. "It's fine."

"Huh-uh."

"No, really. It's sore, but no more than that." Ryou unbuckled the bracer and started to unwrap the bandages in illustration.

Darius barely glanced at the arm, and gave Ryou a piercing look until he judged that to not be an exaggeration, and nodded shortly. "Good, we'll leave it for today then, but tomorrow we will go to the temple. If nothing else, we owe Hygeia's altar a couple of doves or a rooster for keeping that bone from grinding or swelling too much during the trip."

"In my culture, we give money or rice," Ryou said through the folds of his tunic.

"Yeah, that'd be interesting," Darius mused, tossing down the metal shin guard from his left leg. "Let's try giving Hygeia some cereal and see if your arm falls off."

"Ha ha. I'll follow your advice on the matter, Darius, but won't the priests take money instead?" It seemed a waste to kill a couple of birds just to toss them on a fire. Ryou had never bothered thinking about food shortage or the provenance of his next meal before, until that time in the Broken Lands where roast squirrel was the epitome of fine cuisine.

"I wasn't going to buy a chicken at the market and hew off its head on the doorstep," Darius said with a crooked smile, sitting down to take off his sandals. "We buy tokens of the animals at the temple, and the sacrifices are made away from the sick people. It's something the Hygeians insist on," he added with a bemused shake of the head. "Inder, Ashur, Enlil, they're proper Gods. Every equinox Leyam has to strip down to a skirt and hew off the head of a black bull in worship of the deities protecting our lineage. I stepped in for him three years back when he caught the flux, and I gained a new appreciation for my brother. Not only will the purification rituals before and after drive you to seizures of boredom, but do you know how hard it is to chop through a bull's spine?"

"I can honestly say that I do not have a clue," said Ryou, folding his clothes neatly on the nearest bench. "So we're just going to give the priests of Hygeia some money after all."

"No, we're making sacrifices. They perform them at another place. It's got something to do about blood attracting bad sickness demons."

"The priests would actually go out, buy two doves with the money you gave them, and burn them out in the back yard?" Ryou couldn't help but ask.

"If your life was dedicated to the Goddess of Blessings who keeps you from catching the plague, the great sicknesses and all of the lesser agues, would you try to scam her?" Darius countered.
Ryou opened his mouth to retort when he happened to catch sight of a man bowing deeply at the entrance to the baths. Ryou had the unnerving feeling the servant had been there for awhile now, bowed and waiting for them to notice him.

Darius didn't seem to think it odd when he turned to see what had made Ryou jump. "Is anybody else in the baths this evening?"

The servant finally straightened with a sonorous, "No, my lord."

"Food and wine, then. Towels, of course. Oh, do we have soap?"

The slave had bowed again at each request, but that one stopped him halfway down with a look of surprise. "Soap? Oh yes, we do," he added, eyes darting down again and finishing the bow.

"Good, my friend here doesn't like the strigil. Is that Thracian the King bought still here? Urtupati, I think his name was."

"Yes my lord."

"Call him over. We were on the road for three days, we need some muscles unknotted."

Ryou leaned forward, past the bowing servant, and took in a glimpse of several rooms rich in tile, marble and mosaics, with baths, basins and an actual swimming pool. 'Take a bath' did not mean 'sit in a tub' in Assyria, he concluded.
Though the style was wildly different, the principle of Sura's royal bath was similar to onsen, and Ryou found himself oddly reassured by this small familiarity. The light supper served on the benches of a warm anteroom was excellent; fine bread free of grit, meat that didn't taste a little funny, fruit that was not even slightly withered. The wine was almost as good as the one Ryou had barely tasted in Leyam's chambers. Urtupati took great care in shaving Ryou and anointing him with various fragrant oils, and then he gave Ryou a massage that felt like that Roman deserter, Gaius, working him over again. It wasn't for the faint of heart, but once Ryou cleaned off the oil, soaped, rinsed off and then slipped into the large basin of warm water with Darius, he felt just about as good as he'd ever felt since coming to the Outlands.

The basin walls had tiers so that bathers could sit and recline with the water up to their chests. Ryou sank down in the warmth with a groan of relief.

Darius smirked. "Still doing fine, I take it?"

"Better than fine now. Thanks."

The sun was setting outside of the large open balcony. It must never get cold here, Ryou concluded drowsily. Right now the temperature was hot but agreeable with the evening breeze, particularly in conjunction with the bath itself, warm from the hypocaust. Ryou soaked in bliss, watching the faint current chivvy around packets of herbs that'd been tossed into the water to perfume and purify it. The water came directly from the aqueduct, Darius said, and was heated and piped into the various baths before flowing outside and making its way through what the locals called 'the scented gardens', due to the fragrances, oils and soap that soaked the soil.

They were alone now, to Ryou's relief. Three men, two with slave marks, had been hovering around them all the time while they ate and washed off. Ryou hadn't felt comfortable with their subservient presence, just a minor part of the greater moral discomfort of the notion of slavery in the Outlands which, he had to admit, was probably what bugged him about this place the most, even more than wars and killing. It was also an intrinsic part of life from here to the Maurya Empire and beyond, so Ryou was trying to drop his qualms into the same oubliette he was putting a few other things such as animal sacrifice, women's rights and absolute monarchy. But with Urtupati and his brethren hovering around obsequiously and calling him My Lord, it wasn't quite as easy...

Darius muttered a curse, and Ryou cracked open an eyelid, glad of the distraction from his increasingly sterile thoughts. The two of them had settled in one of the corners of the square pool so they could sit on the underwater tiers at right angles and talk easily, rather than across the four meters of the basin's width. Darius was removing the disks braided in his hair and attacking the latter with a comb, with mitigated success. Darius had ignored the presence of the slaves and servants throughout the evening with the habit of a lifetime, though he'd oiled and scraped himself, refusing a massage. Ryou wasn't surprised, Darius was self-reliant by both nature and necessity, not having these amenities on the field of battle. He could have used some help with his hair, though. It'd probably not been properly shampooed and combed since the hospital in Tokyo, as Darius would not have taken time out for that much barbering on the eve of the battle of Essin, and he and Ryou had been on the move ever since.

"Need some help with that?" Ryou asked.

Darius just gave an amused snort as if Ryou had made some ridiculous and even slightly indecent joke. Apparently a man did not take care of another man's hair, not unless the first man was property
and thus did not count. Ryou did not insist.

Ryou watched him for awhile, mind wandering back over the earlier part of the evening. He had a lot of questions...and he was waiting for Darius to say something, Ryou realized. He was afraid of touching on some sore point if he just asked straight out 'so, how long has your brother been cross-dressing?' Ryou shook his head, sending a droplet flying from his hair before it could put another streak of moisture on his glasses. Right, maybe he should wait until Darius said something, and Darius would wait until Ryou asked, and then they'd be back where they were in Essin with something desperate going on and Ryou would have to jump through dimensional hoops in order to get his answers. Waiting for an auspicious moment to talk about cultural differences like animal sacrifices were one thing; but if Ryou was going to be cautious regarding important and personal details concerning his lover, the man he was forging a relationship with, then he might as well have returned to Japan and gone through with his marriage to the proper, intelligent and mother-approved Misuko-san.

Darius tossed down the comb and submerged briefly to rinse his hair. Then he shook himself like Chamrosh coming out of a stream, leaned back and picked up the wine goblet on a tray one of the nameless slaves had left within easy reach before discreetly disappearing.

Ryou cleared his throat. It sounded loud in the baths after the short silence. "Darius, I wanted to ask you, ah, your brother-"

Darius burst out laughing, sending raucous echoes bouncing around the tiles.

"You should have seen your face back in the Hall!"

"His appearance did catch me off guard," Ryou said stiffly. His faint undertone of accusation made his lover laugh even harder. "Great, I'm glad you find it amusing. Do you think I offended him?"

"With that golden mask you wear? No, I don't think anyone who doesn't know you would have noticed anything out of the ordinary in your behaviour. And even if he did, Leyam would expect that kind of reaction. Hell, he courts it."

Darius splashed water over his shoulder, still grinning, and then without preamble or change of expression he said, "My father, king Narseh-Allit, was murdered seventeen years ago in front of the temple of Enlil by five men, two of whom were supposed to be his guards. We never found them or who was behind it, though it's pretty obvious in hindsight. The motherless bastards also killed Queen Sophrone who was with him, and our little sister, a babe in arms, the merciless fucks. That left the reins of power flapping in the air, and blood flowed thick that day. Leyam and I were out in the practice grounds at the time, training our archery. We were found there by some soldiers from Sophrone's personal guard and isolated for three days while their officers decided who they should follow, who they could trust and who was likely to pay them their wages. When we emerged, Leyam was king, though nobody would stand to his banner because of his age. He was eleven. I was eight."

Ryou was silent. Nothing he could say would measure up to that, and Darius's straightforward tone did not require any sympathetic background noises.

"Tensions had been growing between a lot of factions the year before, mainly between those who wanted to put all our army into helping the Alliance push the Legions out of the Free Cities, and the cowardly jackals who wanted to insure we became an ally and protectorate of the Imperium so we could be the strongest, Rome-supported power in our region. When the king was murdered, all hell broke loose; like fighting dogs dropped into the arena. Dozens more were dead before the priests of Enlil had even the time to lay my father out on a bier. Things were real messy that year as first one
camp then the other gained the support of the noble families and the provinces. I didn't really perceive any of this," Darius added dryly as he scrubbed his beard in fresh water. "I'd been brought up to go into the army, so my father never bothered teaching me much about politics. All I knew was that our tutors tended to disappear without a trace every three months, and new ones appear; some would give us our lessons in Assyrian, others in Latin, and none would let us out even as far as the gardens. I made their lives miserable; I don't do well locked indoors. Leyam was the one who had to live with the knowledge that at any moment a faction might take power that would see the benefit of not having a prince and a bastard of the old king walking around... Then that motherfucker Cassius Leius won the political game and took over."

"A Roman?" asked Ryou, surprised.

"No, a Ionian from the city-state of Hellias. I think his name of birth was Castor Liex, but he was so pro-Roman he made Emperor Galleo look lukewarm by comparison. As he was the younger brother of Queen Sophrone, he couldn't take my father's throne, but he was blood-related to Leyam and had lots of powerful cronies, so he could be regent. He had to reign through Leyam, which meant he was only going to be able to do it for a few years. Unless by then Leyam could be persuaded to have Cassius continue on as his deputy."

"I see."

"The day after he took power, we became a Roman Protectorate, rot his heart. He exiled any who were too vocal about it, then he invited a contingent of Legionaries into the 'difficult' provinces and even in Sura to keep the peace. Which I have to say, they were very good at. Nothing like the crucifying a few opponents and their families along the highways to insure that people stay quiet. Bar that, the Legions are disciplined and always behave with restraint towards the inhabitants of occupied territories, which is what we fucking well were to all intents and purposes. Good thing my father was already dead, or he'd have died at the humiliation...

"At that time I was separated from Leyam and dropped out of sight into the barracks. It did me a world of good. I told you I was a little piece of work when I was young, right? Well, some old veterans of my father's campaigns protected me for his sake, but they sure didn't put up with any shit. I tasted leather on a near daily basis for a long time. I was a cocky little fuck, tall for my age, strong, well trained by the best since I was old enough to walk, pretty good looking - I take after my mother that way, I'm told. Let me tell you, I'd made my sacrifice to Ishhara by the time I was thirteen, with a temple-street girl of sixteen who thought I was older than she was and who gave it to me for free. So yeah, back when I was nine, I was doing okay. But Leyam had been taken into the palace to become a perfect Roman-style ruler under Cassius's thumb. And I was starting to hear funny things about my brother. Some said he was cowed by the king's murder and the threat he was living under, and it was warping him. Real Assyrians said that what was warping him was that Roman-loving jackal teaching him to be a degenerate; that's why he spent all his days indoors playing with dolls, behaving like a deviant with the slaves and dressing like a girl."

Ryou, startled, paused with his own wine cup near his lips. The whole drag thing suddenly sounded considerably more sinister...

"Yeah," said Darius, catching Ryou's change of expression. "You get it. But at the time... I was young, I saw things no further than a child does. I never wondered, never questioned, I'd just thrash the hides of cadets two heads taller than me for rumor-monging about my brother, our king, the fickle swine. I was waiting for Leyam to grow a couple of years older and kick Cassius out of the country, and then things would be the same as when we were children. They called us the prince and the half-prince of Assyria back then. Leyam has the presence and the mind of a future King, I had the brawn and the courage to become his general; we were the pride of our family, of our country. That was the
future we'd once had before us, the one I thought we still had; we'd be the prince and the half-prince once more and we would not be touched or tainted by what was going on in the world.

"I learned. So did the world. It learned to call us by two very different names by the time we were grown."

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"Hi Leyam," said Darius, leaping to the ground from the window. "Nice dress."

"Go hang yourself," said Leyam without bothering to look up from the scroll he was reading. He was always reading. He'd pretend to read De Historia Imperi, but he really read the texts Darius filched for him from the library and temples. Boring stuff to a nine-year-old, all about past politics rather than wars, and mostly in Greek, which Darius had never mastered much beyond the alphabet.

Leyam was wearing a pink affair and two red skirts adorned with silver tassels. Darius didn't think about it much anymore, beyond noting that his brother didn't look all that good in that color. He knew the dresses were a way of bullying and punishing his brother for refusing to be turned into a nice little Roman. If he had to choose between dressing like a Roman boy or an Assyrian girl, it'd be just like Leyam to choose the latter. Darius obscurely approved, though he didn't know why Leyam put up with it at all. But Leyam had always been like that. He'd not get into an undignified scrap outright, he'd just take twice the revenge later. Darius had good cause to know; before they'd lost the king last year, the brothers had already been close, but half their interaction had been a running battle of astonishing ferocity that would only be set aside if a tutor or an older boy from the court proved to be a greater, common enemy.

That was behind them now. They had the greatest common enemy of all times. Fucking 'uncle' Cassius.

Darius repeated it out loud, just for the pleasure of it.

"Please come up with other words," said Leyam snidely as he tilted the scroll to the lamplight. "You spend too much time in the barracks. He's not here, anyway, he's in Thezali province until tomorrow."

"Nah, he got back shortly after sundown, me and Barodor saw him from the gate," said Darius, looking for the plate of candied fruit and sweetmeats that was frequently on his brother's writing table.

The scroll hit the floor as Leyam shot out of his low chair. "He's here?!

"That's what I said- hey!"

His brother had grabbed him by the arm and was hustling him towards the window. "Leave."

"What? But he just got in. It's the first qa, the night watch has already turned out, why would he bother to come here at this time."

Darius's mouth went dry as he realized that, over the sound of Leyam dragging him towards the window, he could hear footsteps outside.

Leyam shoved Darius up to the window sill- then yanked his brother back down with a bitten curse. Leyam's chambers gave out onto a flat roof a story below, that and the decorative tilework was how Darius got up and down to regularly visit his brother. And the night patrol's first stop was always that roof, faithfully watching over the royal suites. Darius knew their routine, they'd move on in a few
minutes to go inspect the gardens.

Leyam made a noise of something like pain, and shoved Darius behind the drapery.

"Promise me you'll leave as soon as the guards are gone, whatever happens. Promise!"

"Huh-" said Darius and then he had a mouthful of drapery.

The door opened, the curtain over it was pushed aside and the regent to the Assyrian throne came into the room.

"Oh, uncle Cassius, you're back," said Leyam neutrally. He'd positioned himself furthest from the window he could manage.

"That's right, the subsidiaries of the Taibor were quite passable, we didn't have to go out of our way to ford them." Cassius was dressed in Roman garments as usual, and he'd taken the time to bathe after his journey. He had one arm looped around a girl of perhaps fourteen made up in pretty colors and jewels, and without much light in her eyes.

"I heard from Maximus that you did well in your studies while I was away. That is good." Cassius always sounded easy and urbane, even when he was reading out a death sentence. "I brought you some more to study tonight. And a treat," he added with a smooth smile, though his hands were empty other than the one on the girl's shoulder.

Leyam said nothing and just stood there like a pillar.

Cassius looked surprised. "Now what?" There was an edge of sharpness behind the easygoing tone. "This isn't going to shock you now, is it? Aten help you, child, if you arrive at Caius Octavius's house with that kind of attitude."

"Can we...I was busy, Uncle. Can we..." Leyam was looking around the room at his writing table, his scrolls, his maps, his carved wooden soldiers and mathematical tablets for siege engine elevations, anywhere but at the window. "I was going to go to bed."

"Well then that's perfect," said Cassius, pushing the girl towards the screens that split the study from the bedroom. He followed, reaching for Leyam in passing, fingers brushing the tawny hair.

At which point Darius sank his teeth into the man's thumb.

Cassius shouted and jerked- and screamed as Darius only ground down more and hung on, flesh ripping beneath his eyeteeth.

The door burst open, and Caeso Atius ran in followed by a guard. Atius's sword was already drawn- but Leyam threw himself in the way of the bodyguard with a shout.

"Let go!" Cassius tried to pry Darius off, then he smashed his fist against the boy's head. The second time, Darius's mouth jerked open. He staggered back and sat down heavily on the ground.

"You-" Cassius was no longer suave. He stared at his torn and bleeding thumb and then at the child. "You little-

Darius shook his head once and then shot up from the floor with no warning.

Atius brushed past Leyam and caught Darius mid-air just as he was about to latch onto Cassius again.
"Got you, you little whoreson," the bodyguard grunted.

"Hold him!" gasped Cassius.

Darius's face was a snarling mask, blood all over his chin. The hate in his eyes burned with the passion and purity only children could conjure. Cassius stared, then he grimaced angrily and put his hand on the dagger he wore at his belt.

"No!" Leyam shouted, moving between them, arms wide.

"Leyam, step aside," said Cassius, still working on getting back to suave.

"I'll do it, my lord," said Atius, getting a better hold on the struggling nine-year-old and turning towards the door. "We should have gotten rid of him from the start. I'll-"

"No," said Leyam.

Atius hesitated. The command, and that was what it was, had not been directed at him, but it covered him nonetheless.

Leyam and Cassius stared at each other. Nobody said anything for a while; the only noise in the room was Darius's panting and the occasional drip of blood falling onto tile from the drops escaping Cassius's toga pressed to his injury. The other soldier who'd followed Atius was gaping instead of doing anything constructive. The girl Cassius had brought had sunk back against the wall and was staring at the blood pouring down Cassius's fine tunic as if she did not know what it was but thought the color was pretty.

Leyam put down his arms and stood like a pillar again, looking away. Cassius smiled. It was the smile of a reptile. "Very well, my King. We will spare the by-blow if that is your wish." But his attitude said it was a wish that was being bought at a price.

Darius once more made a spirited attempt to get away from Atius and hurl himself at the regent. The latter smiled as if he now found the child's efforts amusing. "It is true that a monarch should exercise some mercy, Leyam. But you are aware that by assaulting me - in your presence no less - he has committed a crime against your sovereignty. That cannot go unpunished."

Leyam shrugged. It looked horribly artificial on his stiff body, the girl's top now askew on his thin shoulders. "Fine by me. Beat the idiot. He's used to it. He's just a blockhead, he's not worth your time, Cassius."

"Uncle," corrected Cassius. "How old is that deva, anyway? Aren't you the oldest?"

"He's nine," muttered Leyam, who'd been the same height as his half-brother ever since he was ten and Darius seven.

"Damn." Cassius looked at Darius again, and then he laughed.

"My lord?" said Atius, startled. .

"It's fine, Atius. I know exactly what to do with the little beast. Follow me."

Atius didn't hesitate, he threw Darius over his shoulder and walked out of Leyam's apartments, ignoring the child snarling and pounding on his armoured back with his fists. Cassius, followed by a suspicious Leyam, strode through the palace hallways and down the marble stairs. He paused to take a cloth from a startled slave heading back from the baths, and wrapped it around his thumb as he
made his way out into the gardens. Darius was trying to twist around to hit Atius about the ears and neck despite the jostling he was getting when Cassius veered from the path and took a shortcut to the wall and the royal stables.

"If you're going to have him horsewhipped, do it in front of the whole garrison," said Leyam suddenly. "It would be good to make an example of it, and it would shame him the more."

"In front of your father's veterans, you mean?" asked Cassius approvingly. "That's very good, Leyam, particularly the bit about making it an example. Most persuasive, and had it been what I had in mind, it might have swayed me. But you are mistaken if you think those grizzled old cowards would make me hesitate to do anything permanent to the little wretch. That was a miscalculation on your part. Try to do better next time."

"I didn't mean-"

"Of course you didn't, child, of course you didn't."

Darius's brother didn't say anything else, and a few seconds later they were in front of the kennels. The dogs inside were barking at the approach of so many footsteps this late at night. The door opened just as Cassius reached up to bang on it. The elderly man in charge of the hunting pack rubbed the sleep and surprise out of his eyes as he looked out.

"My lord?" he gasped, startled and anxious. Cassius walked right past him, looking around.

"This will do fine," he said, then he glanced at the kennel master. "Do you have a- no, wait, this is even better. Atius, over there."

"Yes, my lord," said Atius in the satisfied tone of one who'd figured out the plan and agreed with it wholeheartedly. He carried Darius to the wall where the larger hounds were tied and where an empty ring with a chain and collar lay on the ground. He swung the boy down and shoved him into the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of him, and had the reinforced leather around his neck before Darius could do anything about it. He had to hike the collar tight and make an extra hole with his knife to get it fit around a nine-year-old's throat. "Don't move," he whispered viciously as he punched through the leather, "or I'll accidentally cut off your ear, and your nose too while I'm at it."

Darius shot back a few breathless words he'd learned in the barracks until Atius shoved him hard against the wall again.

As soon as the adult stood up, the dogs that'd been cautiously crouching back moved in, sniffing at the scent of blood.

"They'll hurt him," said Leyam tightly, then he corrected himself, "they'll kill him, he's too small. We were going to let him live."

"Nonsense," said Cassius, "they'll get along fine. It's the best place for the animal." He approached the wall and gave his handiwork an approving glance. Darius looked up quickly- but Atius brought his leg down and back, pinning the boy against the wall, head smacking into the wood.

"That's right, Atius, keep the dog down. Hmmm." Cassius looked at the boy, and then focused on the collar. "What's this? It has a name. Ghan. That means 'strike', if I remember my ancient Avestan. A dog's name; that's perfect. Leyam, you'll make it a decree, will you not?"

"What?" asked Leyam, confused. Behind him, the kennel master gaped.

"That will be the little cur's name from now on," said Cassius as he made his way towards the door.
"Ghan the dog. He'll answer to that name alone, he'll live in this kennel until he's ready to crawl to his masters, and if he bites again, he'll be getting more than a kick in the teeth," he added with a pointed look at Leyam as he drew near the young king. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Leyam through clenched teeth.

"Good. Come on, Atius. And you," he added to the astounded kennel master, still without bothering to look fully in the man's direction, "you will give him the same food as the other curs. If you show him preferential treatment, I will see you whipped, castrated and tied up next to him." He didn't wait for the master's frightened acquiescence before striding out of the kennel and back towards the palace.

Leyam followed in his incongruous finery, stopping near the master to mutter, "See that he survives or I will have you quartered." Then he left the panicking man behind him and followed the regent. Atius left last. He didn't give the master any advice, just hooked a hand beneath the latter's elbow and hauled him out of the kennels. The man didn't dare protest.

The door closed, hiding all but a sliver of the light from the torches burning along the garden path for the first watch of the night. Darkness and the snuffling of dogs ensued.

The two nearest went to investigate the new arrival, ears and noses pricked. These were the large hunting dogs meant to hound bears and lions, and a few were trained for warfare as well; children were not allowed near them until they'd neared a man's height and could handle a whip.

The largest straightened, approached stiff-legged, eyes focusing on the boy's face. Darius continued to stare at the door. The hound closed in, faint growl of dominance at the ready, and then Darius looked around, hauled back and punched down on its muzzle with all the venom that could not reach its target.

The hound yelped and staggered back, shaking its head. It snarled and looked up—met Darius's gaze and decided to go back to its own little territory.

They left him mostly alone after that. Darius went back to staring at the door.

At the start of the fifth qa, as the night grew darkest, a scratch at the other side of the wooden wall made him stiffen. The chain around his neck clinked as he turned around. When the scratch came again, he rapped his knuckles softly on the wood.

With a creak, one of the wooden planks started to shudder. A knife's blade appeared in the crack, levering and sawing. Darius reached for his belt, and realized Atius had relieved him of his own dagger. This was the first time he'd thought of it all evening. It had been a small one, fit only for eating, but it would have helped get that plank off easier; as it were, he got splinters as he pried it off.

The wood gave way with a loud creak, and Leyam looked through the opening.

The brothers stared at each other through the gap. The kennels backed onto the paddock near the stables, to get the horses' used to the smell of dogs and vice versa. Leyam was in a servant's tunic that was a little too big on him, a cap on his head.

"I couldn't do anything," he said. "For what you did, he could have you killed. Nobody would raise a hand."

Darius stared at him, a set look that did not waver. "Is it like the Greeks?"

Leyam opened his mouth, but didn't say anything, and Darius continued without waiting for an
"Because that would be-" there was a hole in that sentence where the word 'alright' refused to dwell ", but that's not what it is, because maybe you're at the age where a Greek boy might be- might be courted by a mentor, but they'd never do that, he makes you wear a dress, Sopartes told me back when he was still our tutor that it is a great wrong to turn a boy into a girl, men are men and women are women. Okay, we have the painted men in Sura, sure, but they're not warriors and some of them are whores and you're the king of Assyria. I am going to kill him."

The last was added in the same intense child's whisper, it took Leyam a second to react.

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

Darius's lower lip thrust out, an expression that made him look stubborn as well as ridiculously young.

"Darius..." Leyam sighed and propped his chin on his fist, his eyes dark in the half-light of the moon above, the only illumination. "He wants to send me to Roma Praetorium."

Darius's mouth opened around an unvoiced cry of pain, expression suddenly lost.

"Don't worry. I'm not leaving. I'm not going to get educated in Rome, I'm not going to become Roman and I'm certainly not going to live with Cassius's pervert master."

"I can kill him," said Darius as if continuing the first argument without a pause. "If you distract Atius, I'll sneak up behind the son of a whore and put steel in his liver. I've learned how to do it, I'm strong enough. I can do it, Leyam."

"Yeah, and then what?" asked his brother tiredly.

"They can kill me! I don't care!"

"They will kill you, I care, but that's not the point," said Leyam in the same tone. "The Roman faction is much too strong and they're now backed by triarii in the provinces and even here in the capital. There's Romans everywhere you look, overseeing the construction of the roads. If you kill Cassius, another like him will take his place."

"Five hundred Roman shitlickers won't stand up against a thousand free Assyrian men. Two thousand even! They'll protect you! Leyam, you're their King, if you give them one word-""

"I didn't see them last year," said Leyam in a voice that sent chills down Darius's spine. "Darius, you have to understand how it is. Cassius is smart. He's making me wear a dress, and his friends spread rumours about me, so that the Assyrians won't want to stand behind me. Without a King to unite them, there's too many factions, one for each noble family too stubborn to set aside their differences. Not unless someone forces them to. Someone-"

"That's why he makes you wear a dress?" Darius interrupted in a muffled voice. He was chewing on a thumbnail and looking at his brother and then away again.

Leyam paused. "Yeah. I have to do it if I don't want to accidentally fall off the highest tower with my hands tied behind my back. It's how Cassius knows that I'm under his thumb, because I allow it. In turn, it insures I'm even more under his control because I'll need the muscle of his troops to hold the country even when I'm grown. This kind of politics is what he's been teaching me this last year. He can't have me helpless; he wants me to grow up like him, to be his ally. He will need my support as much as I'll need his one day if the Alliance truly unites and decided to put pressure on my"
country. But he's not bedding me, if that's what you're worried about. I may be young enough but that means nothing since I am King, and he cannot afford to undercut me that much."

Leyam said it very straight, looking Darius right in the eye. Darius should have been reassured. But something deep inside of him flinched. His brother wouldn't lie about that. Would he? The reasoning was sound to Darius's ears, so surely Leyam was telling the truth...Right? And there couldn't be anything worse than the earlier hypothesis that'd sent Darius barrelling out from behind the curtain to plant his teeth into the regent's thumb.

At the far back of young Darius's mind crawled a mostly unperceived image of Leyam and the dead-eyed girl and Cassius watching and teaching- but that was too alien for the boy's mind to fully grasp...He fastened his eyes on Leyam and decided to trust.

"You have to get into your head that Cassius is not an idiot. He could never afford to be. What else he became...He was sent to study with that man, his master, Senator Caius Octavius, when he was your age. All because he was the fourth son of the second wife of the Hellias king and nobody could care less if he was made a hostage as a consequence of border tensions in that region. He was seen as dispensable from the start, and then his own father sent him to that man-" Leyam interrupted himself as if sensing that what he was trying to say wasn't getting through Darius's hostility. "Well, that's what happened; his father wanted a few of his spare sons to learn Roman ways while the others learned from the Greeks, like that he'd make good with both and get his milk from two different cows. And Cassius learned damn well. Two dozen years later he's back, and the one brother of his who did not die fighting the Legions just happened to eat some bad food at a banquet where nobody else even caught a cramp, and died screaming the next day. Cassius is now Tribune-Consul of Hellias for life. Not that he cares, he's sold out his home land to the Imperium and set his sights much higher. Hellias is a city and a small region; Assyria is a whole empire. He's got his priorities straight. Make no mistake, Darius, Cassius needs me to reign if he wants to do so with ease, but if he can't do it the easy way, him and his Roman allies will slit my throat and bathe our land in blood and fire until it can no longer fight back."

Darius gave him the same look of helpless pain as before.

"I don't care about dying," said Leyam in passing, as if it hardly was worth mentioning, "but I will not let my land in the hands of these jackals. They'll rip it apart."

"But what are you going to do?"

Leyam was silent for what felt like a long time. The bitch at the left side of Darius managed to stretch to the end of her chain and poke her nose out the hole. Darius pushed her back absently.

"I am going to learn."

"Learn what?"

Leyam didn't answer directly. "We are going to have to be patient, Darius. We have to pretend he's won, that I'm becoming Roman like he wants me to; that I'm becoming everything he wants me to. I'll just learn slowly enough where it won't ever be quite the right time to send me away. I won't let them bundle me off to the Imperial capital. A king does not leave his country, not like this. Do you get it, Darius?"

"What?"

"I'm going to have to pretend to be a Roman ruler. In a way, I'm going to have to really be the thing he wants me to be," said Leyam slowly. "But I swear to you right now, Darius. By the blood that
runs through both our hearts I swear that whatever it looks like, whatever it seems I've forgotten, I'll remember who I am. Do you understand?"

The clouds of rage leaked out of Darius's mind. He knew. He was nine, and though politics had always bored him, he knew enough of them and of the ways of the world. He knew what his brother was saying, what was going to happen in the next few years. "Okay. Okay. I'll help. I'll go and-" Darius made a hacking noise in his throat, and then he muttered, "I'll go apologize. Then I can-"

"No."

The bitch barked and then whined when Darius shoved her away again with a shush.

Leyam pressed his fingers together against his lips, eyes fixed on a point of the wall beneath Darius as if looking for the words he had to say. "No," he finally said. Darius, staring at him, wondered when his brother, perpetually skinny and a little small for his age, had become a man, one who could think and talk and act like this. "Darius, I want you to make me a promise."

"Yes," said Darius immediately. Because though this man surprised him, Darius still knew him; this was his brother and his king.

"I want you to be yourself. I never want you to pretend like I will."

Darius blinked. "Huh? But Leyam, I can help-"

"You can help, Darius, but not in this way. Cassius has seen the truth about you, he won't forget it in a hurry. If nothing else, he'll have a scar on that thumb to remind him. If you suddenly become all nice, he won't believe it, and that'll get him suspicious about me. So don't be nice. Show him you hate his guts. Do it for both of us. You've always had a bit of a brutal side when you wanted to, bring that out. But don't ever fake it, little brother. One of us has to stay himself, do you understand? I'm relying on you to always be yourself. Like that I will too."

Darius thought that made sense, mainly because he was nine and used to the ways boys talked. "But I have to do something more to help you."

"You will. And what I'm asking you isn't easy. For starters, do you want to apologize to him?"

"I'd rather be a eunuch," said Darius in an older, dangerous voice that could have been borrowed from the man he would one day become.

"Don't give the bastard ideas," muttered Leyam. "But that's what I mean. You'd have to cut your heart into pieces to apologize to that lech, so don't. But that means you'll be living in this kennel for awhile. For quite awhile. He may not look like it, but he's smart, and he doesn't forget fast."

Darius chewed that over, then he shrugged and gestured at the mutts behind him. "That's fine by me. I like these guys better than his courtiers."

"Yeah, I wish I could join you," said Leyam under his breath.

"Are you sure I can't help?" muttered Darius miserably after a short silence between the brothers.

"You will be helping me. You'll be my decoy. I'm asking you to get into lots of trouble, brother; the kind of trouble you used to cause when you were seven and didn't like our tutor. That will give Cassius leverage over me when I have to intercede on your behalf. I'll just make him think he has us both under control. Cassius won't be suspicious of a chained and collared beast who shows his hate openly; hell, it'll titillate him. He'll be more suspicious of the smiling one with the knife behind his
back, which is why I'll have to be very careful. But I'll learn. We're both going to learn. I need you to become a warrior, Darius. You're training hard already, I know it, but you have to be better, you have to be the best. One day, I'll need you. When I've rooted out Cassius's sympathizers, when I've determined who is still Assyrian and who is a Roman in disguise, when I've learned all that he and his ilk have to teach me and I'm the master...then I'll need you."

"I'll be there."

Leyam put his hands through the hole on either side of Darius's face, drew him forward and kissed his brother. Then he left without a further word.

Darius sat facing the hole for a long time. His brother had been wearing a servant's tunic, but he'd smelled of perfume.

Darius sat there, savagely wiping away the tears trickling down his face and turning his mask into a swirl of blood and dirt, the last time he ever cried in his life.

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Darius shared the scraps from the kitchen with the other mutts, augmented by a few discreet additions thrown in by the kennel master when the latter thought he could get away with it. The boy slept with the other hounds, was made to run after game during hunts, and stayed in the kennels whenever he was not training in the barracks. He snarled at any who offered sympathy. He bit Cassius's soldiers who taunted him. He did considerably more if they weren't careful. They gave him a belting for every injury he caused. He ignored it and did it again as soon as he was healed. People soon lost the looks of scorn or pity and traded them in for disquieted expressions and sometimes fear. That was good. But it wasn't enough.

When he was ten, Darius decided that a warrior on a battlefield was not going to be of any use to Leyam, not for years to come. The more he learned about the world he and Leyam lived in, the more he realized how hard this battle was going to be, and it was not one that required phalanx formations or the perfect arc of a javelin throw. That was useless. He needed to learn another way to kill. Darius crept out nightly of the kennel through the broken planks he'd carefully arranged as a hidden exit, and went to the training fields to practice what he thought was the art of murder.

One night, the perfect opportunity to apply what he'd taught himself was in his grasp. One of Cassius's soldiers was sitting alone on an embankment near the artificial stream, the swirling waters breaking up the reflection of the half moon above the palace gardens. Darius would not stand a chance in a fair fight with a grown man yet, but if he could creep up behind the bastard, slit his throat and then make it look like a drunken fight, it'd throw confusion in the ranks, especially when the officers looked for a suspect. That was the kind of warrior Leyam needed now to fight the Romans and pretend-Romans infecting their country. Like that one, dressed up in gear that shamefully copied Legionary armour, drinking from a jar of liquor, watching the moon and occasionally laughing to himself in a silent fashion that shook his shoulders even as Darius approached him from behind.

"You've never seen me," said the man.

Darius, knife in hand, froze a man's length away.

The soldier tilted his head to look up at the stars. "You've seen me many times, but you've never seen me."

Darius hoped the idiot was totally drunk, though the cold feeling in his stomach told him the man sounded way too lucid.
"In the same way, you know me but you have no idea who I am. Can you answer that riddle, overly-young bastard prince?"

Cold feeling confirmed. Darius crouched, hidden as much as possible by darkness and a bush growing on the top of the embankment.

"That's good. Don't move. I might be talking to myself, or just playing a hunch," said the soldier, getting to his feet. He was a huge brute, large across the shoulders, towering high in the night. Darius had seen him many times, the guy was a foot soldier in Cassius's personal retinue; twenty-two years of age, hailing from a far-flung and barely populated province. He was often used as a courier by his master; people didn't interfere with men of his build when he took to the highways by himself.

The man turned with a last leisurely look at the moon and moved a step towards Darius, who clutched his knife. The giant looked down as if something in that step had caught his attention. He went down on one knee and reached for his sandal strap. But only one hand touched it; the other hand was flat on the grass, the gesture of fealty. The eyes beneath thick bangs met Darius's amongst the interlaced branches of the bush.

"My real name is Rand. I served your father from the shadows. You never saw me without a mask, young prince, but I have seen you many times, and I have been watching you this past year, you and my king...I wasn't sure how to approach him."

Darius's instincts, keen as a blade after a year in this harsh world, prickled and wondered if what Rand had been unsure of was Leyam himself, rather than the approach to take. Leyam was fully into the role of Cassius's apprentice, and most were deceived.

He said nothing, waiting. Rand's lips twitched into a dour smile. "You have some promise. I don't think this trade is yours, my Lord of the Kennels, but I will teach you enough of it to stay alive when Cassius finally decides your entertainment value is not enough to keep you alive, not if he can make your death look like an accident. In exchange, I want you to take a message to your brother next time you have one of your, ah, secret meetings."

A wave of alarm tightened Darius's hand on his knife's hilt...though he also felt faintly ticked off at the indulgent tone that reduced his and Leyam's precautions in seeing each other to a children's game of Hide. "The only thing I do when I meet my brother is complain about his uncle," he finally said, still within the bushes in case he needed to make a run for it. "And then he mocks me and tries to get me to admit I'm jealous of his palace life when I live in a kennel. I wouldn't go see the prick at all if he didn't give me his leftover meals."

"An almost believable lie for someone who has not watched the two of you grow up together," said Rand gently. Then he stood and turned around. "I'm glad to see you can dissemble when you have to. Fine, you will not bring a message to your brother. Very wise, it could be a trap. You will not tell him that King Narseh-Allit's former strangler, Pyon, is dead, but that Pyon's younger brother survived the cull and has infiltrated Cassius's guard. You will definitely not tell him that I am keeping an eye out on who in the noble families are working with Cassius, and who are merely being threatened into obedience instead, and above all do not mention that I am at his service as long as the Fates gives me life to defend him and his throne. Make sure you don't tell him any of that," he said, sitting down once more to watch the moon over the Taibor far below.

"If you're our servant, are you supposed to talk to me like that?" Darius finally had to ask. Though he'd often been at the receiving end of harsh words and actions, there'd always been a kind of begrudging regard behind it, even from those who hated him and wanted to belittle him; regards for his bastard parentage, for his promising strength, his abilities or his looks. He'd never been teased like a little kid before.
Rand did the silent laughter again. "If you manage to become the fearsome warrior you obviously aspire to be, young Darius Bher Polenius, then that day I will speak to you as politely as I would a great lord. Run off now, and don't try to kill anyone until you've decided to trust me and let me teach you how. Or at least do not sneak up on them from upwind when you live where you've been living this past year. Good night."

Muttering childish imprecations, Darius ran off.

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Darius was thirteen, striding across the courtyard in the light armor of a courier. The reinforced tunic added harsh lines to a young body that was already shaping into a weapon. He was carrying his helmet under one arm, the sun falling on short dark hair with a faint curl. Many men and women turned to watch him pass, and he didn't even notice.

Leyam was with Cassius amongst the colonnades, out of Darius's line of sight. Cassius had grown soft in the last four years, pudgy and ill as heavy responsibilities along with his various vices caught up with him. His gaze followed the boy-man striding under the sunshine like one of the gods Cassius professed to no longer believe in.

"Strike me blind, Leyam, is that your brother?"

"Oh, that's right, you haven't seen him in almost a year," said Leyam disaffectedly, lifting the wine cup which a well-bribed slave pretended to fill much more often than it actually was.

"Hmm, no, I haven't. Damn those rebellious provinces, keeping me from the charms of Sura, hmm?" He'd picked up that oily hmmm along with a few pounds of extra flesh and red veins around his nose. "Darius."

The young man continued to walk as if he'd not heard anyone call out his name.

Cassius lost the smile. "Darius." There was a warning in his tone.

Before it could become an order, with a need of reprisals dictated by the presence of watching courtiers, Leyam called out: "Ghan."

Darius stopped and turned.

"Oh, that's right." Cassius walked towards him, smiling once more. Leyam trailed him. "That's right, it's Ghan. You've grown up well; the kennel must suit you."

Darius stopped and turned.

"So, Ghan," said Cassius, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. Darius was only a couple of inches shorter than he was now. "We were discussing sending your brother to blessed Roma Praetorium after this year's flood; it's high time and more. Tell me, would you be interested in going too? You could, hmm, learn a lot."

Slowly Darius looked down at the hand on his shoulder. Then his lips twitched back, a jagged expression revealing eyeteeth. Cassius instinctively snatched his hand away from that ugly, feral expression that would befit a wolf better than a man.

Darius's eyes lifted to Cassius's. "Woof," he said. Then he turned and walked away.

Cassius stared after him. "Leyam, is your brother insane? Does he realize-"
"You raised him in a kennel, Cassius."

"Uncle," corrected Cassius automatically, still staring after Darius.

"So yes, I'm afraid he is a little unhinged, but he's so amusing. I love him dearly." Leyam emptied his cup with a graceful gesture. "I have him sit at my feet some evenings and scratch his fleas. Don't worry, he doesn't bite anymore. I whipped that out of him eventually. Shall we go on inside?" he added as his uncle stared at him, halfway between suspicious and reluctantly impressed. "This heat and sun are doing nothing for my complexion."

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An adult Darius idly swished the waist-deep water of the bath around him, looking up without really seeing the mosaic of an unrealistic dolphin near the ceiling.

"It was shortly after that that the regent tried to have me killed again. It was the third time, though this attempt was actually serious. Two stranglers, not just a soldier who'd been given a jug of strong liquor and a hint. I didn't need Rand's help to dispatch them that time, though. But that was the beginning of the end; things couldn't go on that way. It was time to cast our fate in front of the gods.

"Six months later, he was dead." Darius's smile full of fangs was the one he'd showed 'uncle' Cassius. "Leyam killed him and I threw his body to the dogs."

That ugly expression hitched and crumbled when Ryou, who'd come up behind him, slipped his arms around him and rested his forehead on Darius's shoulder.

"Feh, did I sound that pitiful?" Darius sneered. "Save your tender sympathies, Inlander; we fought a losing war with the weapons we had, we turned all the tables and took our revenge. That's to celebrate more than anything. You can let go." He shrugged his shoulders, but Ryou held on and didn't say anything.

After a few moments, Darius's frame loosened. He didn't speak, but he leaned his head against Ryou's and put his arm along the one holding him around the waist. "Well," he muttered and didn't add anything, but there was a whole sentence in that one word. Ryou held him tighter.

Finally Darius shook himself and patted Ryou's arm. "If you're going to embrace me like this, maybe we can do something more interesting than taking a bath."

Ryou snorted, letting Darius draw away and grope Ryou good-naturedly in passing as he made his way to the edge of the baths.

"After that, it was a mess again. The pro-Alliance camp and the pro-Roman camp fought for control over the weak, wastrel King. They didn't realize Leyam was a poison in their midst. With Rand's help, he'd discreetly pruned Cassius's side over the years, leaving the truly vicious and stupid ones alone but killing the moderates and the smarter ones. And those he knew he could trust - because Cassius had not - he showed them the truth. Or rather, some of it. My brother has as many plots and layers as he has dresses, and he loves them all despite what you might think. 'Keep them guessing' is his first plan of attack and his best defense, and he sure does enjoy it. He wields it as well as I wield a sword, yet as carefully as I use my shield, too. Even at his worst, he always keeps the aura of Kings about him; royal excess is eccentricity, he says, it's awe-inspiring if done well. Just look at the king before our grandfather who'd flay people he didn't like and drape their skins before his throne. The halls must have stunk like a charnel house, but I bet nobody said anything. So yeah, those whom he trusted...they knew the truth. They learned what his plans were, what he'd done to get that far already, and hell, if that wasn't enough to impress them, they hated the Romans like poison and didn't
need an excuse to oppose them. Six months after Cassius was sent to Hades, a lot of his friends had followed him. The others broke and ran to the provinces and Imperial-controlled city states, and we've been at war in stages ever since. Leyam's plan kept reaping benefits. They had a hard time taking him seriously; they let him pick them off one by one while they desperately searched for the power behind the throne that was directing this young King so ably. Even now, our enemies don't know just how crazy he is or which way he'll jump. It's funny, isn't it? They fear him more than if he wielded armor and spear and draped skins around the Hall.

Darius hauled himself out of the bath, padded across the tiles and reached for a towel.

"So my brother was raised in danger and depravity while I was raised in a kennel, and for good and bad, that's all you need to learn about us to know us, Ujiie Ryou. Well, now I've got to go and get the men sorted out in the barracks, and Inder cudgel me, I've got to make sure they released Dela and that he's okay. Just stay here and recover from the road, I'll send someone to fetch you and show you to your quarters, okay?"

"Okay," said Ryou. He'd have been happier going with Darius, even if it was to the quartermaster and then to jail to free Dela, but from the way Darius was briskly drying off and not looking fully in Ryou's direction, his lover needed a little space after that tale that'd revealed so much about the two Princes of Assyria.
Ryou waited until the sound of his lover's footsteps faded, then he hoisted himself out of the bath. He didn’t feel like wallowing in luxury just now. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do, but he didn't want to stay alone in this ringing open space with the occasionally echoing drip of condensation as only punctuation to his thoughts. He walked over to the alcove where the bath attendants had placed towels and Ryou's dirty, travel-worn clothes. It was a shame to slip into that after finally getting thoroughly clean, but it wasn't as if he had much choice in the matter. Ryou currently had two pieces of clothing to his name, that and the tunic Darius had given him, which was in a small pack last seen tied to his horse, location currently unknown.

The bath was rich with the scent of oil, water, wet stone and soap, but a new smell made Ryou wrinkle his nose in surprise; a heady fragrance like incense.

"I can see what he sees in you."

Ryou spun around, shock a heavy weight in his chest.

Leyam Sirrian, King of Assyria, was standing two meters away, leaning against the pillar of the alcove and looking Ryou up and down with the disinterested appreciation one would give a marble statue. He was wearing an embroidered wrap of yellow silk, loose sleeves high up the arm, carelessly belted in front so that Ryou could see that the only thing beneath it was the same short skirt as before. A woman's style but quite casual, especially when contrasted with what the Bitch King would consider formal. He’d come to have that further word with his brother, Ryou immediately guessed. That meant he might have overheard part of their conversation about him. The thought compounded Ryou's vulnerability at finding himself alone in the presence of the king of this land without Darius acting as a buffer, and Ryou naked and dripping wet to boot. The only way he could feel more exposed and defenseless was if his glasses had gone missing.

And what was worse, Ryou was intimately convinced that Leyam knew it.

Leyam moved towards Ryou, bringing one hand out from behind his back, and Ryou got another nasty surprise when he saw the king was holding the bracer Darius had given him.

"These were costly," said Leyam, looking down at the piece. "Not just in money; I had to personally pray at the altar of Hygeia for three days and make many a sacrifice for these to be done for my brother. Such objects cannot be bought with mere coin alone, and they are worn by heroes and legends. As for this," Leyam added, tilting the bracer to glance down at the circle symbol of the moon, "only members of the immediate family can wear this crest etched in bronze, gold or silver."

Ryou wet his lips with his tongue. His mouth was dry despite the humidity of the baths. "I didn't know-"

Leyam interrupted him by holding out the bracer in a careless manner as if nothing had been said. But he was watching Ryou's face out of the corner of his eye. Ryou did not look away and kept his expression set on neutral as he slowly reached out and took the piece of armor from Leyam's hand.

The king didn't say anything. Ryou knew this was some kind of statement or test, but he could not tell if he'd passed or failed. Leyam's smile was as breezy as before, maybe a tad more artificial as if
he did not care as much to make it convincing. What was beneath it, though, Ryou could not begin to tell. This mask, mobile and pleasant as it was, was more adept than Ryou's. Both he and Leyam had hid their feelings since roughly the same age, but while Ryou had lived with nothing but constrictions to reinforce it, Leyam had survived several years of death threats with the fate of his country hanging in the balance.

"This is my first time meeting an Inlander," said Leyam conversationally. "And a powerful magian to boot."

Here we go, thought Ryou. "Whatever your brother may have implied, I'm not really a magian. I have some abilities, but I have no idea of how to use them and my control is very sketchy. I was extremely lucky to make it so far."

"Hmm, I doubt that," said Leyam, taking a lazy step forward as if he wanted to look at the baths through the arch of the alcove and hadn't noticed Ryou was partially blocking his way. Ryou, once more acutely aware that he was naked, shuffled back half a step. He discreetly reached down for one of the towels on a nearby bench- but Leyam turned towards him so suddenly it made Ryou instinctively straighten and turn to face him once more.

"Soldiers are great believers in lucks, gods and such not," said Leyam, stopping right in Ryou's personal space to look at a detail of the mosaic over Ryou's shoulder, a fish with the face of a dog. "But you and I are not soldiers. We are clever men who live by our wits and not our muscles. The results of our actions may sometimes look like luck, but it's always calculated risk and we have a way of getting the odds on our side."

"I suppose," said Ryou, taking a half step to the left this time.

The fragrance of incense doubled in strength as the king was suddenly at his side, leaning terribly close.

"Let me tell you a little secret," Leyam whispered conspiratorially. "I distrust clever men. The cleverer they are, the more I distrust them; a Greek mathematician could probably make one of their theorems out of it."

Ryou found himself backed against the tiles of the wall.

Leyam took a step away and held up one finger as if bringing it to Ryou's attention. "Let me show you why I distrust intelligent people. I only arrived for the last three stanzas of the tale - and what a tale, yes?"

The silence stretched until Ryou opened his mouth to say something, and then Leyam rolled right over the first syllable. "Darius told you that I'd asked him to never dissemble, did he not? That's the part he always brings up. My brother thinks it's because I respect his nature and wanted him to stay true to himself and be my guide. But what do you think my reasons were?"

"What? I don't know, how could I -"

"Oh of course you do," said Leyam laughingly as if Ryou was being purposely coy to tease him. "Come on. Tell me." The grin widened, just as Darius's had before he cut off Prince Yrmah's fingers. "Now."

Ryou could have repeated that he didn't know. And he didn't. Though it was true that an uneasy supposition had crossed his mind while listening to Darius earlier...But it wasn't the kind of thing he'd want to discuss, even if it wasn't complete guesswork. No, reiterating his complete ignorance
would be the wise and rational thing to do.

'I distrust clever men,' was what Leyam had just said...This was Darius's brother, Darius loved him and trusted him. Maybe this was an occasion where being honest and straightforward would be more valuable than being clever.

"I imagine it was a gamble," Ryou said, voice a little tight. He cleared his throat. "It was a gamble for you, to play a, er, a-

"Decadent Roman girly-boy," Leyam provided helpfully.

"Right," Ryou croaked. "It got your uncle to drop his guard and take you into his inner circle where you could core it from the inside, and bring about the downfall of the men who'd sold out your country. But it was a gamble whether you would still be able to convince your own countrymen you weren't totally, uh-

"Degenerate," suggested Leyam, still being helpful. Ryou wished he wouldn't.

"So it occurred to me..." Ryou gripped his bracer in his hands. He couldn't believe he was about to say this to his lover's brother, right to the man's face; Ryou had no proof of what he was about to advance, this wasn't a fact in any way, shape or form. But it was a reasoning, it made sense, especially with what he now knew of Leyam. He'd learned a lot from Darius's tale, and he'd learned even more in the past two minutes. What he did not know was how Leyam was going to react to his words. Ryou was just going to have to trust that behind that flashy mask was a man he could reach out to and convince and who still knew how to trust in turn...

"It occurred to me that if the loyal Assyrians could not accept you as their King, you had another man of your father's bloodline who could step in and replace you. A man you'd shaped into a warrior-prince, who would always have been seen as defiant despite all the humiliations and punishment inflicted upon him. A contrast to what you'd, that is, what you had appeared to have become. A last resort if you were losing control of the situation, since for Darius to take your place, you'd have to be...Of course this is just a theory, I apologize, I know absolutely nothing about this country or the situation or-

"Yes, but you are quite right, which just goes to illustrate my point about clever men," said Leyam with a toothy smile. "There are very few people in the known world and beyond who have guessed what you've just told me. My brother is not one of them, and I wish to keep it that way. Yet you, who have only just arrived, heard this secret through his unknowing words. I don't like men who can think at my level. You can see that, right? If Cassius Leius had thought at my level, I'd be dead by now or worse. Do you think it was a good plan?"

"What?" Ryou asked weakly.

Leyam took a final step forward. Ryou backed away- and had to catch himself against the tiles as his knees pressed back into the stone bench and nearly tripped him. "Would Darius have made a good king? Better than I?" The smile had grown ever wider, cheerful and mocking and right in Ryou's face without any pretence of civility. "Wouldn't it be better all around if I suddenly dropped dead and my brother took the throne? What do you think? Come on, your response, Inlander."

"I can't answer a question like that! How can you possibly say such a thing?" Ryou said, reining in a reflex flicker of anger at the preposterous demand, the insistence and the fact that he was not being allowed to even pick up a towel. "You're his brother, he loves you- we should not even be talking about this. He'd not be a good king anyway, he can't sit down three days to besiege a city, he's not got the patience to- not that he's- I meant-" Ryou's brain finally caught up with his mouth and put a
stopper on it. The full import of Leyam's question had just struck Ryou and he was suddenly aware he'd snapped at a man who could have him killed in any number of barbaric ways without a trial, and who apparently found him suspicious enough to indirectly accuse him of plotting against him.

But instead of calling for the guards, Leyam had leaned back with an odd quirk to his mouth as if Ryou had poked him. The threatening veneer was gone as abruptly as it had appeared, leaving Ryou's head spinning.

"So that's what you think?"

Ryou just stood there, naked and dripping, and looked at Leyam helplessly.

"You people don't have kings, do you."

"...What? Well, as a matter of fact, we do. Have an Emperor. He's...it's different."

"It must be, if you do not realize that being a good monarch or a bad monarch is pretty much irrelevant. Oh, the country might suffer some, but in the end the important thing is to have a King, a continuity, and Darius would fill the role adequately enough." Ryou was favored with a long, hard scrutiny. "Rand was right about one thing."

"...Rand?"

"Yes. He put together a detailed account of your interaction with my brother and what he himself thought of you. He did find the balance of his trust weighing in your favor, you know, which is pretty good since you have to admit that the train of events that led you to associate with Darius is weighed down by at least one massive coincidence, while the rest of it sounds well-nigh insane. But he concluded by saying he wasn't sure of anything because he found you extremely hard to read. You are. Fortunately your words are not as guarded as your face."

"I am sorry if I offended you," said Ryou, hoping a blanket apology would suffice because right now he wasn't sure anymore which part of the conversation he was apologizing for.

"It takes considerably more than that to offend me, Ujiie Ryou," said Leyam, pronouncing the name perfectly. "And what your words told me was that you really are clever, dangerously clever, but that you don't seem to have much of an agenda here and that you're so enamored with my brother it's embarrassing to watch."

Ryou's eyebrows twitched upwards at the tone, and Leyam grinned as if Ryou had formulated his objection to that out loud. "No, no, you have to concede my words. Here I am, proposing my sudden demise to let the man you're bedding become King of Assyria and head of the Alliance against Rome. There were so many pitfalls waiting for your answer, so many assurances of loyalty you should have made, so many blessings to ward me from harm you should have called down upon my head...and all you could think to say is that Darius would hate it because he'd be bored?"

Show them nothing, thought Ryou grimly, calling up his full control to hide the wash of feelings - some of them quite irritated - as well as to keep a flush from invading his face. "That is not what I said."

Leyam burst out laughing, a snorting bray that didn't suit his appearance or character at all, yet sounded more real than anything Ryou had heard so far from the Bitch King of Assyria. "But that's exactly right and you know it! Well, well, of all the people I was afraid the mutt would one day drag home, he chooses an intelligent man of distinction, sensibility and restraint. What is the world coming to? The Veil and the Grand Design must be unraveling."
"I know the account of my arrival here must seem truly amazing," said Ryou, discreetly grabbing a towel and some control over his part of this conversation along with it. "But it's the simple truth. And really, if I'd had any bad intentions, I would have found a better story to allay suspicions."

"Oh? I find that the more stupendously crazy the story, the easier it is to fool everyone," said Leyam brightly.

He'd be the one to know, Ryou conceded dourly. He shoved up his glasses and forged on ahead. "Look, I don't think there is a way for me to prove myself at this point, not if Darius's account couldn't convince you, but given time-"

He was interrupted by an effeminate flap of Leyam's wrist. "Oh, don't be so tense. I've decided to trust you."

"...Really? You'd trust an intelligent and powerful magian who's become entangled with your brother under such strange circumstances?" Ryou challenged bluntly.

Leyam's eyes gleamed. "Hell no, I wouldn't trust you worth a damn on the strength of that alone. But Darius trusts you. It's not the kind of reliance he has in that motley pack who follow him like faithful dogs; he trusts you," said the king, raised fist pressed into his chest to underline what he meant. "I haven't seen him do that in a long, long time. Damn, he trusts you even more than that dead Greek of his, or at least he treats you considerably better. You and I are clever men, and clever men trust nobody. Darius is not clever. Oh, he's not dumb; you can put away that frown. Though I'm glad to see you make an expression, I was beginning to feel like I was talking to the bath's statuary. Darius has had no formal education since the age of eight, but one does not need to be able to recite the Codex and the Gathas to be able to think, plan and destroy an enemy army. Darius does not rely on his reason to trust someone, though; the mutt goes entirely by instinct. My sense of reason would not give you the benefit of whatever slim doubt there is, it would have no cause to do so, but if Darius trusts you that much, I'll rely on his judgment. I've done so before on a few occasions and it's never led me wrong. And you'll trust me for the same reason, right?" Leyam added, speaking loudly and fast as he grabbed a startled Ryou by the arm and pulled him energetically towards the exit to the baths. "My little brother is terribly blind to all my faults, but he does love me, may Ashur give him some guidance, and so you must love me too eventually."

"Wait- where are we-"

"To get you something to wear," They were already out of the marble and tile refuge and walking along the covered portico outside. The warm evening breeze blow-dried the last drops on Ryou's back in passing while the towel, not big to start with, was slipping from its position around his hips. "Those rags back there are not fit for one who has become close to my family. Isn't this wonderful? I feel like I've gained a second brother!"

"But I'm not dressed!"

"Yes, that's the point."

"I'm naked."

"In this heat, so should we all be," said Leyam without any hint of the answer being meant as flip, reminding Ryou that nudity was not a taboo here. "Come on, we'll roust the clothmakers and see you fitted out. They won't have time to make much tonight, but I'm sure we can get you decently clothed before the sun god once more rides out into the skies. Nope, this way. Come!"
Chamrosh and Zuru, who'd been curled up on a blanket near the entrance, suddenly perked up and leapt to their feet. Seated in a window alcove on the other side of the room, Ryou turned from his study of Sura's night to also watch the door. He could hear footsteps and the mutter of instructions from the hallway outside, punctuated by the occasional, "Yes sir." Then Darius opened the two-paneled fretwork door and pushed aside the tapestry with one last nod at the departing underling.

The dogs were up and panting happily, waiting for attention. Darius glanced around as he rubbed their ears. "Ryou? Ah, there---what the..."

Ryou followed the direction of Darius's stare and glanced down at himself. The last hour had been very instructional. For instance, Ryou now understood how very modern the idea of clothes retail was. Everything in Assyria was made to measure or modified to suit, even the linen skirts of the slaves or the rough tunics of the laborers. On the other hand, Ryou had learned how amazingly fast a unique creation of couture could be made when it was the King of Assyria who commanded it. Back in Leyam's chambers, the King had clapped his hands, given an order and ten minutes later a naked Ryou was getting measured with knotted ropes. Then he'd been practically sewn into a set of trousers and short linen tunic of a green so dark it was almost black, all taking shape around him and for him. Silk ribbons of golden material embroidered with green and brown thread were stitched right into the hem while Ryou stood there. The ribbons also crossed around the knees and thighs of the trousers to fit them to his legs and cinch in the waist.

The tailor had apologized, bent deeply at the waist, for the simplicity of the garments due to the lateness of the time and one of his workers being dead drunk; tomorrow morning first thing he would beat the man and then get Ryou a few more additional essentials. The only thing that did not get made from bolts of linen on the spot was the knee-length sleeveless surcoat, because nothing the tailor had on hand would be fine enough for the King's guest. Cloth would have to be made to order. In the meantime, Leyam had one of his servants fish a couple of decorated tunics out from wherever the royal clothes were kept. The tailor left his two sober assistants to finish Ryou's tunic while he took the hand-me-downs apart and redesigned them from the ground up. Ryou was looking down at the result now. When Leyam had said Ryou was to be clothed in purple, he'd not messed about; it was a rich, deep color, linen woven so fine it almost felt like silk, sturdy yet light. Dark brown brocaded panels inset with onyx and gold squares were sown onto the chest where the garment tied loosely shut with two brown and golden ropes. The king had been there the whole time, needless to say, giving additional instructions to the tailor with the glee of the truly fashionable Assyrian, and then grilling Ryou about the latter's home country whenever the servants, slaves and hired hands wandered out of earshot.

Ryou had been dropped off at Darius's quarters by two of Leyam's personal guard, after having been given the royal order to have a good night with no bad dreams. That was ten minutes ago. His head was still spinning a little.

"Darius, your brother-..." Is phenomenally smart, machiavellian and weird to the point of being manic. That gaudy, giddy mask of his is so thick that I'm not sure even he knows where it begins and ends any more, but he uses it with undefeatable assurance. Beneath all the panache he's bloody scary, and his enemies are right: the dresses and the makeup and not knowing how loony he really is only makes him scarier, not less. "Ah, your brother is an interesting man."

"Leyam, huh? I should have known." Darius joined him at the window, looking him up and down slowly. "Well, whatever he chooses to wear, you have to concede he's got good taste. You look...different. Assyrian. Why are you still up? The moon has been out for nearly a qa, I thought that lucky bastard Morpheus would be whispering in your ear by the time I turned in."
"I wasn't sleepy just yet," Ryou lied. In truth he was exhausted, but the uncertainties of the day and Leyam on top of all that had wound him up and he did not think he could sleep if he tried. Fortunately none of this made it through his restored composure, so Darius took it at face value and nodded.

They both turned as one to watch the night outside. The Noble Quarters were in a wing off of the main royal building. They were at the top of the hill that was the royal enclave, so though Darius's chambers were only a story up, they could see the wall surrounding the palace and the steep fall of the city below. Lights glimmered here and there, a warmer reflection of the stars above. The Taibor was a faintly luminescent shimmer at the near horizon. Ryou wondered if boats poled up and down it even now, heading towards the Paths of Zaratusra and other alien lands.

"So what do you think of my home?" Darius asked, staring out into the night.

"It's beautiful." And dangerous, but at this point it was what Ryou had come to expect of the Outlands. He did have a considerable ally, though, standing at his side and watching the stars above the city. And though Ryou expected Leyam to scrutinize him very carefully over the next few weeks, it seemed the king was at least halfway ready to give Ryou the benefit of the doubt. Since there was very little Ryou could do here that was suspicious, innocent and lost as he was, Leyam would eventually see that he was harmless and would hopefully accept him as well.

Maybe then Ryou might feel a little less...foreign. He hadn't traveled all that much outside of Japan; three times to the US, once to Norway. He'd been struck at how alien those places were, the little details as well as the large ones. He really hadn't had a clue...Assyria and the Outlands weren't just some foreign tourist location, either. Ryou watched the night outside and finally confronted the thought that, if he stayed here for any length of time, he was going to have to think differently and become a different person. He already had, of course, and some of the changes had been for the best and long overdue, but it wasn't going to stop there. He was going to have to get tougher, more decisive, and his moral compass was going to get quite a change in direction too. This world was brutal and didn't have any of the safety nets a modern man took for granted. A lot of it also made his civilized instincts recoil. And the sheer otherness of this society was like a constant pressure; he just could not imagine himself ever getting used to it, of walking through these palace halls or dusty streets a year from now as if he belonged...

A breeze shook the palm trees, a dry rattle like bones. Ryou had to grimly admit that he was scared. He just wasn't sure what scared him the most; of changing too much, turning into some amoral mercenary who did not care about anything beyond the safety of his own little coterie of lover, friends and family...or of not being able to change at all, of always being a stranger in a strange land until he couldn't stand it anymore and had to leave.

Ryou snuck a peek at Darius's profile on the heels of that thought. His lover was scowling faintly, leaning far out of the window and looking to the right. Ryou turned that way, twisting in the window seat and leaning out to see what had caught Darius's attention. That's when he noticed someone was singing; he'd been ignoring it so far with the ease of a long-time apartment dweller used to tuning out televisions and radios. But it wasn't some impersonal machine out there. Ryou searched for the singer, but caught sight of something else before he could pinpoint the location. Thirty meters away, in the garden with the peacocks near Ashur's hall, three girls were bathing in the waters of the burbling fountain. Ryou looked away immediately, but he'd still caught sight of them; teenagers, bodies young and lithe but womanly already.

It was while he was trying to find something else to fix his eyes upon that Ryou found the source of the singing. The palace had series of flat roofs, some pillared and covered to make patios, others open. On the highest of the latter, two soldiers were standing near the balustrade. One was leaning
over it, the other had just one arm planted there. Ryou could see the pair quite well at this angle thanks to the moonlight. Not well enough to make out their faces, but from their posture and the voices, he could guess they were both pretty young. Boys were taken into the army as young as fourteen, Ryou knew from his time with the Hounds. If he had to make a guess, he’d put those two between sixteen and eighteen; only a little older than the girls bathing right below the spot the guards had just happened to pick to stake out their watch and insure the security of the royal palace. The girls washed as if they were completely deaf to the singing, but Ryou doubted people really washed off that gracefully if they were just intent on getting the day's dirt off quickly before going to bed.

The garden was quiet bar the splashing and the chirp of insects. In that hush, the two young voices, simple and untrained, sounded strikingly beautiful. But warbling away was almost certainly not what these two were supposed to be doing...Ryou felt his lips twitch as he glanced from the unfortunate guards to the commander of the Hounds at his side. Oh dear, he thought, catching sight of the expression he rather expected on Darius's face.

"Tomorrow morning before the sun even rises, I'm rousting every single officer in this garrison and giving them a talking to. Then I'm conducting wholesale training in full armor and battle conditions throughout the whole goddamned afternoon. Racing, wrestling, target throws, the works. Nineel the Tezalian is in charge of the city defenses," he added, misinterpreting Ryou's glance as a question. "But it's well understood that, illegitimate get that I am, I still have precedence by right of blood, and fuck if I'm letting that kind of laxity spawn worse ones. They’d let the goddamn Roman army march right through here if they got dancing girls to precede them.” He grumbled something else under his breath and looked ready to shove away from the balustrade to go have a word right now...but instead he stayed leaning against the windowsill next to Ryou, who was listening to the notes in the darkness.

Ryou settled back, obscurely reassured. He was still tense and worried deep down, more than he'd ever been since the age of thirteen. He was also more alive than he'd ever been since the age of thirteen. He had to trust himself in the face of these dangers and unknowns. If the past few weeks had shown him anything, it was that he was more resourceful than he'd previously thought. Besides, not everything here was strange and unquantifiable. He knew Darius, to start with. The Hounds he'd met were not like anyone he'd known back home, but they were straightforward men and he'd gotten along well with them. He even had a bit of a grasp on Leyam, which was undoubtedly more than most people could say. Ryou found himself smiling as he listened to the young men singing under the moonlight. At the end of the day, these Outlanders had strange and obscure customs, but people were people...

The girls soon finished their bath, dried off, wrapped themselves in long robes and departed with a swing of the hips that might have been meant as tempting and mature, but merely came off as young. The soldiers stopped singing and started circling their station once more, and Ryou and Darius looked out into the warm night side by side for a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of the first arc. There will be a few Intermission chapters, of Ryou exploring his new home in Sura and running afoul of this and that custom or way of thinking. Then there will be another arc of a few chapters. Then its on to brand new stuff. Thanks for reading!
Works inspired by this one:  
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