**Drawn**

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**Drawn**

by [Fai_Gensou](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Fai_Gensou)

**Summary**

It’s not just the present generation of dragons who are drawn to Yona…

...and Hiryuu is closer to the surface than anyone guessed.
Chapter 1

Disclaimer: Don't own Akatsuki no Yona

Yona was a chatty baby from her earliest days, always babbling and giggling at unseen people. King Ju-nam was convinced she was talking to his wife, Yona’s namesake, who had died about a year before her birth.

Guen, Abi, and Shuten couldn’t help but hang around their reborn King. “Man, if he’d been a girl the first time around he wouldn’t have needed us.” Guen commented, dangling his necklace for baby Yona to try and grab.

Her hands always passed through it, but she kept trying.

“He must really have gone senile to come back as a girl.” Shuten retorted, standing guard by the window.

“Haven’t you had enough of questioning His Majesty’s state of mind?” Abi asked drily, offering Yona his necklace to try and grab. “And quit hogging her attention.”

“It’s nighttime; shouldn’t both of you stop hogging her attention and let her sleep?” Shuten pointed out. “She’ll never sleep through the night if you keep doing that.”

“Since when did you become an expert on kids? It wasn’t until the last few years of your life that you even bothering hunting down your own oats.” Guen complained. “The moon’s not that high up! She’ll be fine.”

Shuten and Guen glared at each while Abi just sighed. Yona decided it was the funniest thing ever and started giggling madly.

Her mother poked her head in with that. “I wish your spirit guardians would not keep you up, no matter how happy they make you.” She walked over and straightened the light blanket covering her lower half.

She was unusual in refusing a wet nurse, feeding and looking after Yona herself. Yona beamed up at her mother, focusing all her attention on her. “Sweet dreams little dove. Not that I need to say it.” Her mother kissed her forehead and left the room.

Shuten couldn’t help looking triumphant.

“Wonder if we could enter her dreams?” Abi mused later in the night, Guen and Shuten dozing on each other. “We could with Ouryuu.”

“He’s a dragon; rules might be different.” Guen proposed with a yawn.

A noise beyond the wall drew all their attention. The three couldn’t help tensing in anticipation of an attack, until Guen gasped. “Ouryuu…?”

A small section of wall slid open, and their eternally young brother crawled in. His eyes had more life in them than they had seen in a while. The trio watched sadly as he crawled over to where baby Yona slept, his wife trailing behind. “Hello brothers,” Kaya greeted them. “He couldn’t keep away.”
“Still can’t see you?” Shuten asked.

She shook her head. “But Zeno and Kaya can be together in Zeno’s dreams, even if he can’t really remember in the morning.”

“He can see other ghosts, so why…?” Abi asked as Zeno knelt by baby Yona, working up the nerve to look inside the crib.

“Too much pain.” Guen answered, somewhat gruffly.

They all crowded around the crib, peering in as Zeno finally looked inside. Yona opened her eyes as he did, as if she had sensed his presence, beaming up at her Ouryuu.

A pulse rippled through the room, and Zeno clutched his medallion as he bit his lip. The voice from so long ago echoed through the four dragons’ souls.

Warriors of the Four Dragons

From now on, you are our other halves

With Hiryuu as your master, protect him, love him, and never betray him

For as long as you live!

“….I wasn’t…expecting that…” Zeno panted, Yona looking up at him with concerned eyes.
“Wouldn’t the original vow been enough…?” He wondered, as he licked blood off his lip, the cuts from his fangs already healed.

“Ou…” Attention was refocused on Yona, frowning as she struggled to address Zeno.

Zeno ran his fingers gently over her crimson hair, easing her frown. “Zeno’s fine, Miss.”

“Miss?! He was the most formal of all of us!” Shuten roared.

“Shh!!” Kaya hissed.

“…just not expecting what happened. But Zeno can feel you better now, so it’s fine.”

Yona eyed him like she was trying to determine if he was telling the truth. She held her arms out, a clear request to be picked up. “If Zeno does that, he won’t be able to let you go again.”

Reaching inside his tunic, he pulled out a stuffed animal in the form of a crimson dragon. “Zeno couldn’t get everything for the other four, so I’ll be back four more times.” He promised her as he placed the dragon next to her.

Kaya elbowed Guen, gesturing to the door, which was open a fraction. ‘Her nurse?’ She mouthed.

‘Her mother’, he mouthed back.

She didn’t seem inclined to intrude on the scene, a gentle smile on her face.

Yona snuggled up with the dragon, yawning as she did. Hands clenched on the side of the crib, Zeno leaned over and kissed her head. “Zeno will be back soon Miss.” He whispered, slowly retreating to the small door in the wall.

“Kaya will see you next time brothers!” Kaya exclaimed, following Zeno as he left.
The door slid open gently a few minutes after Zeno’s departure. “He told me not to turn Ouryuu away should he come, and I can see why. So much sadness…” Yona’s mother whispered. “But it might be crueler to have him stay. Nothing changes faster than babies.”

The trio exchanged questioning looks, not knowing the ‘he’ she was referring to.

“Should I be jealous of another man appearing in your dreams instead of me?” Her husband, the current King’s second son, teased as he joined his wife in the door.

“Oh hush you.” She chided. “If that was the case then I’d have to be jealous too; you did say you saw him too.”

“True…” Her husband conceded. “Is it selfish, if I don’t want the fire to ever awake?”

“We’ll be selfish together, then, and create as many happy memories as possible, should the darkness Hiryuu-sama spoke of comes.” She answered as the door slid shut, leaving a sleeping Yona and three flabbergasted ghosts.

To my BoE fans: I’m sorry; I found a new blond to torture. I’m on vacation this week, so I will get off my ass and post a new chapter by next Monday.
Chapter 2

The trio just stared at each other. “She did just say what I thought she said, right?” Abi finally asked. “That Hiryuu-sama warned them of coming darkness?”

“That’s what I heard too.” Guen said. “Maybe that’s why it so hard to stay away, beyond her being Hiryuu’s reincarnation.”

“Bit useless as we are.” Shuten said glumly. “Never thought Ouryuu’d ever be more useful than me.”

“We can still keep watch.” Guen reminded him. “And if we try hard enough we’re sure to be able to alert someone.”

There was really nothing more to be said with that.

They did not see Zeno again until winter, near the solstice. The heavens seemed intent on burying everything in white, so his visit was something of a surprise.

It was another relatively dull night. “We’re dead; why the hell am I cold?” Abi complained, huddled next to Shuten.

“If I could answer that, we wouldn’t be cold anymore.” He answered.

“A-ba!” Yona’s exclamation drew their attention to her.

She had pulled herself up to stand in the crib, and was pointing at Abi. “She said my name!” Abi cheered.

“She said, ‘A-ba’. That is nowhere near your name.” Guen pointed out, jealous that Yona had not said his name first.

“She’s one sound off and is pointing at me.” Abi retorted, walking over to her. “A-bi.” He told her, pronouncing his name carefully.

“A-ba! Gu! Shu! Ze!” She pointed to each in turn, ending with Zeno, who had just opened the wall to enter.

“Zeno may never have had children, but he’s certain you’re meant to be sleeping.” He crawled out.

“Can’t the bastard have the decency to look cold?” Shuten grumbled, eyeing the lightweight clothing on Zeno.

“Language!” Guen hissed.

“Ou-Ze!” Yona said once Zeno was at the side of the crib.
“That’s right; Ouryuu Zeno.” He told her.

“Se-A-ba! Ha-Gu! Ro-Shu!” She told him emphatically, pointing to each in turn again.

“Zeno’s brothers have visited you? The miss is too cute to keep away from for long.” Zeno replied, resting his hands on the crib rail.

“You blind idiot; we’re right here!” Guen choked out, trying not to cry.

Shuten found the wall very interesting, while Abi pressed his sleeve to his eyes.

Yona placed her hand on top of his, shocking him. Looking at Zeno seriously, she repeated what she had done before. “A-ba. Gu. Shu. Ze.”

Looking to Zeno’s immediate right, where Kaya had knelt unseen by Zeno, she said, “Ka.” Pointing as she did so.

“They’re….here now? Zeno’s brothers…and Kaya?” Zeno whispered, tears gathering as he frantically looked everywhere Yona had pointed.

“Kaya is always with Zeno. And our brothers are always here with Yona.” Kaya whispered, grabbing his arm as the other three crowded around.

Zeno started as they each touched him. “I…haven’t felt them…for so long…” The gathered tears starting falling.

Yona lifted her hands to rest on each of Zeno’s cheeks, the look on her face so much like how Hiryuu had looked at them that it was hard to believe she was only eight months old. “Ze.”

“If only we could preserve this image!” Kaya cried, caught in the feelings of the moment and the cuteness of the scene before her.

“Zeno is fine now Miss.” He told her. “It’s just been a very long time.”

Yona studied him seriously, before pulling on his tunic. “Ah, Zeno does have another dragon for the miss.”

He reached inside and pulled out a stuffed white dragon. “It was hard to pick…but Zeno felt for winter it should be Hakuryuu.” He said as he handed her the new dragon.

Guen couldn’t resist pumping a fist in the air.

Shuten just hit him with his spear.

“Gu! Shu!” Yona exclaimed, giggling as she pointed to them.

“Are Hakuryuu and Ryokuryuu fighting again?” Zeno asked, looking to where she had pointed. “Zeno can’t see them…or Seiryuu or Kaya. But it’s enough for now, to have felt them again.”

He smiled at her, running a gentle hand over her hair. “Will you let Zeno cover you back up? It is really cold.”

She beamed at him as she laid back down, carefully setting the crimson dragon on one side, while clinging to the white dragon.

“Zeno will be back when it’s warm again, for your first birthday.” He promised her, somehow
pulling away from the crib to the opening he had entered through.

Kaya just waved goodbye, still wiping away tears.

“Ou-Ze…” Yona murmured to herself with a smile, snuggling in between her crimson dragon and her white dragon.

“That almost makes up for freezing.” Abi declared. “Now stop fighting or I’m going to paralyze your asses!” He yelled at Guen and Shuten, who had devolved into wrestling on the floor.

A sleepy giggle was his only response.

“Did you have a good first birthday Yona?” Her mother whispered into her ear as she brought the drowsy Yona into her room.

“Ze-no…” She said with a yawn, rubbing her face into her mother’s shoulder.

“Zeno will be here soon. But if you don’t go to sleep you won’t be able to wake up when he does come.” Her mother assured her, setting her down in the crib, the two dragons on each side of her.

“Sweet dreams little dove. Happy birthday.”

Kissing her forehead, her mother slid the door closed.

“Time’s flown by; hard to believe she’s a year old already.” Guen commented, attempting to open a drawer.

“And yet time with you two drags on like always.” Shuten complained. “The old Ryokuryuu needs to hurry up and die already so I can whip his ass.”

“He’s still alive?” Abi asked, shocked. “Mine’s still alive, but the new one is only two. How long has yours held on?”

“Ten years!” Shuten roared. “I know I bred stubborn descendants, but he’s setting a record for survival!”

“Eh, my old one almost gone.” Guen added. “Current one turned five day before yesterday, so not much longer.”

“So the current generation will be the ones then.” Abi mused. “They’ve stopped naming my descendants. The current one calls the previous one ‘Ao’ for lack of anything else.”

“Mine’s Kija. The last five generations have been father to son.” Guen told the others.

“The current one is named Jae-ha. He better escape before she goes looking for him.” Shuten grumbled. “I know my descendants have no subtlety…but surely there’s a better way than the one the village is using now.”

“The Seiryuu and Ryokuryuu clans have become fearful of their legacy. I know the Seiryuu lost their heritage when that one predecessor died with the successor still an infant, but…” Abi mused.

“But my successors keep turning into evil spirits when they die, consumed with longing for a master that never came, and the anguish of knowing they would not be the one to serve.” Guen said. “It can’t really be said any of our lines have had happy fates.”

There was a mutual sigh. Before the descent into moodiness continued farther, the wall slid open
revealing Zeno. “But it has to be conceded that Ouryuu has had the saddest fate of all.” Shuten reluctantly admitted.

“Hmm…it’s too moody in here for the Miss’s first birthday. Why are Zeno’s brothers moody?” Zeno wondered as he went to the crib.

“Too much sadness and regret, even in death.” Kaya answered, resting a hand on his back.

“Eh, Zeno’s brothers need to find the bright side!” He said, peeking in at a sleeping Yona.

“He can hear you?!” Guen exclaimed, hopeful.

Kaya shook her head. “Not really. But he can get a sense of what Kaya says if she’s touching him. But I think it’s close! Him hearing me.” She insisted.

“The Miss must have had an exhausting day. Zeno doesn’t want to disturb her, but…”

“Please, stay until morning.”

Zeno practically leapt out of his skin at the response, turning to the door as Yona’s mother walked in. “You are welcome any time you come, Ouryuu-sama.” She told him with a bow. “My name is Cheonsa.”

Zeno returned the bow. “How…?” He trailed off.

“Hiryuu-sama came to me-and my husband-in dreams, while I was pregnant with Yona. He spoke of you, and asked we not turn you away.” She explained gently. “There is no access to this room aside from our bedroom, so it is easy to be sure you are undisturbed.”

“…if Z-I can bring myself to leave in the morning.” He admitted, examining the floor.

Cheonsa walked over to the crib. Picking up Yona, she suddenly (to him) handed her to him. “She has been looking forward to you coming. She must have sensed you nearby, or her guardian spirits told her. So please, stay tonight.”

Zeno’s arms squeezed the sleeping Yona. “Thank you.”

Cheonsa bowed again as she exited, sliding the door closed behind her.

“And now I’m jealous. Always loved holding my children while they slept.” Guen said with tears in his eyes.

“Sap.” Shuten accused, his own eyes suspiciously bright.

Shifting as much as he dared, Zeno made himself comfortable against the crib, resting his cheek against Yona’s hair. Her arms had wrapped around his neck when her mother had handed her over despite being soundly asleep. Kaya knelt in front of them, hands squeezed in front of her mouth. “He’d have been a great father. There had only been a few times where…and I was too ill for it ever to have been a possibility.” She admitted.

“Why can I felt my brothers and Kaya now? I doubt their presence is anything new.” Zeno wondered. “Does it have to do with Hiryuu coming back? But if that’s the case, why would his return let me feel them? Does…does this mean…I could see them again?”

He hid his face in Yona’s hair. “Too much wishful thinking, Zeno.”
“It IS strange.” Abi said. “Thousands of years where he showed absolutely no sign of even feeling us, any of us, to now feeling us?”

“It probably won’t stop there.” Guen added. “We may become as visible to him as all the other spirits are.”

“I wanna know how we’re able to leave Heaven so easily.” Shuten declared. “It’s understandable now, with our senile King being reborn, but even before, we could easily go see our clans or Zeno or Hiryuu Castle even!” He balanced his spear on his shoulders to keep from slamming it in the floor. “So why?”

“Umm…” The three dragons turned to Kaya. “I think…I know something.”

“Yes?” Abi prompted with a pointed look.

“When I died…Ouryuu-kami came for me. He apologized, for not being able to answer Zeno’s pleas to save my life.” Kaya admitted. “When the dragons gave their power to all of you, they gave pieces of themselves. Dragons…they can readily move between Earth and Heaven. That applies to all of you as well. You three…you became part dragon, so after your deaths…your souls can move between Heaven and Earth as easily as they can.”

“That only covers us.” Guen pointed out. “That can’t apply to Zeno.”

“Ouryuu-kami…he saw that the power of the dragon warriors would be needed again. But if all four lines of power were handed down through the generations…too much knowledge would be lost. So he planned ahead, picking Zeno when he was a baby. That’s why he could hear the gods. When the warriors were chosen, Ouryuu-kami gave more than the other three. Zeno is closer to truly being the other half of Ouryuu than you or your descendants.” Kaya looked at the three of them solemnly. “The only one who could have answered Zeno’s pleas was Zeno himself.”

“Alright, hold up!” Shuten roared. “You’re saying that Zeno’s part divine or something?”

“As far as I understand it anyway.” Kaya answered. “I think it has something to do with why Zeno has not been able to even feel us until recently…Ouryuu-kami was able to let Kaya stay at Zeno’s side because he had already shared some of his power with Kaya, even though he wasn’t aware of it at the time.”

Shuten couldn’t help the perverted grin that spread over his face. “So he wasn’t useless in bed, eh?”

“Oi! Stop thinking with the wrong head!” Guen yelled disapprovingly.

“Like you’re in much position to talk.” Abi said dryly. “You had three wives.”

“And as I’ve explained repeatedly, they were identical triplets. It was the easiest way to keep everyone happy.”

“Yeah just keep telling yourself that.” Shuten leered at Guen.

Kaya hid her red cheeks behind her hands, along with a secretive smile.

“Perverts. All of you.” Abi complained with a sigh.

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It was in the early light of dawn that Yona stirred. Rubbing her face in Zeno’s shoulder, her eyes shot open when she realized who was holding her. “Ze-no!”
Zeno jotted out of his doze at her cry. “Good morning Miss. Happy birthday!”

“Ze-no! A-bi! Gu-en! Shu-ten! Ka-ya!” She rattled off the names her trio of spirits had spent weeks getting her to say correctly.

“Zeno bets Abi spent a lot of time getting you to say them right.” He commented.

“OI!!! WE HELPED!!!!” Guen and Shuten yelled.

Grinning, Yona started pulling at Zeno’s tunic, hunting for the present she knew had to be in there. “Ah, be patient Miss! Zeno can get it without you undressing me!”

He pulled out a green stuffed dragon. Shuten started gloating. “HA! You lose Abi!”

Abi sulked in the corner. Kaya just patted his back in sympathy.

“It was kinda hard, but none of the blue or yellow cloth felt soft enough to Zeno. So Ryokuryuu it is’” Yona latched onto her new dragon. “Tha-yo!”

“Zeno has to go now Miss.” With this, Yona tightened her grip on Zeno’s neck. “NO!”

“Oh boy…” Guen slapped a hand over his face. “Here we go…”

“Yona.” Somehow Zeno forestalled the oncoming tears with his tone of voice.

Yona looked at Zeno watery-eyed. “I’ll come back.” He promised. “If I stay here I won’t be able to get the cloth to make Seiryuu or Ouryuu. And even when I’m not here, I’m always thinking of you. So be good for my brothers.”

He kissed her forehead as he stood, balancing Yona on his hip. “Can Zeno put you back in the crib?”

Thinking about it, Yona finally nodded firmly. “Ze-no ‘mise?”

“Zeno promises.” He assured her as he left.

Yona stood in her crib clinging to her green dragon, staring at the place on the wall where Zeno had left. “Ze-no…” She said. “Ze-no sad…”

She set her crimson dragon at the head of her crib and her white dragon at the foot. Still holding her green dragon, she laid back down and hugged it and her blanket. “Ze-no foo…”

Chapter End Notes

If I’m going to keep having Yona’s mother in this, she needs a name. ‘Cheonsa’ means ‘angel’ in Korean.
The three dragons were sprawled out in the shade, watching a sixteen-month old Yona playing in a pan of ice water with her cousin Su-won, who was four and a half years old. Their mothers sat in the shade of the porch chatting. “The youth and energy of small kids is wasted on them.” Abi complained, having stripped down to his under-robe.

“You sure you’re not just ridiculously temperature sensitive?” Shuten questioned, himself having shrugged his robe off his shoulders.

“Says the man with a bare chest.” Guen retorted, eagle spread nearby, down to just his pants.

“Neither of you can criticize when you’re showing more skin than me.” Abi pointed out.

“Heat’s fine; it’s this humidity that’s the killer,” Shuten conceded. “How those two can be playing like this is bizarre. Even if they are playing with water.”

Normally at least Guen would at least be trying to manipulate the water somehow, but with two people around who were unaware of them meant they were stuck off to the side.

Abi raised up on his elbows as he spotted two people approaching. “Incoming.”

“Who is it?” Guen asked.

“The Wind General Mundok…and a kid.”

‘The kid’ was a boy who looked to be Su-won’s age, with black hair and blue eyes. “Somehow he seems familiar.” Shuten commented as he squinted, too lazy to get up for a closer look.

The Wind General soon departed, leaving the boy behind. He just stayed on the porch, evidently unwilling to join the two at the pan of water. The women didn’t try forcing him, patiently trying to entice conversation out of him.

Catching sight of the new arrival, Yona stood and started over to him. “Oh this is gonna be interesting.” Guen said with a smirk.

Hak wasn’t quite sure why the old man who kept calling himself ‘Grandpa’ had even brought him to this castle, let alone to this place with two women watching two kids play. Thankfully they didn’t try and make him play with the other kids. “There’s plenty of fruit if you’re hungry.” The lady with violet-colored eyes told him. He thought Gramps had called her Cheonsa; he hadn’t been paying attention.

“No thanks.” He told her, plopping down on the edge of the porch.

There were three guys in various degrees of undress lounging in the shade. They seemed fuzzy on the edges, like they weren’t quite real. But with the women ignoring them, he decided not to make a deal over it.

“Ha-kun!” A tiny girl’s voice exclaimed.
His first impression was glowing red, like the bright stone his mama had worn. Focusing on her, the second impression was a tiny little girl, younger than him, with eyes like the one lady and brilliant red hair. “My name’s Hak.” He told her. “Not Ha-kun.”

She blinked, like he said something strange. “Ha-kun?”

“Hak.”

“Ha-kun is Hak?” She said, tilting her head.

“Yeah I guess.” Hak agreed, not sure who ‘Ha-kun’ was, but feeling too lazy to argue further.

“Play with Yona? And Won?” She asked, grabbing his hand and starting to pull him with her.

Normally, Hak would have pulled away. He didn’t care much for other kids, but for some reason, he let himself be pulled along as she started running back to the other kid.

She tripped over something, and Hak found himself catching her. “Gotta watch out.” He said.

She looked at him once again like this was a strange remark. “Why? Hak is here. Won is here.” She informed him as they reached the other kid, crouched by a pan of water.

“Hak.” She told the other kid (Hak wasn’t sure if it was a boy or a girl).

“I’m Su-won!” The kid introduced him/herself with a smile that almost blinded Hak with its perkiness. “Water fight!”

Mad giggles were Hak’s only warning as he got splashed. He splashed back, and was soon as soaked as the other two.

He could see the three guys better from his new spot. Their hair was weird; Hak didn’t think hair could be blue or green. The guy with white hair wasn’t as weird, but he had nowhere near the number of wrinkles that other people he’d seen with the color had. While Su-won ignored them, the girl-Yona she called herself-occasionally glanced over at them and smiled.

All too soon Su-won was called over by the other lady on the porch. “Bye-bye!” Su-won called, once again blinding cheerful.

Once Su-won and the lady who had to be his/her mother left, Yona abandoned the pan of water and started pulling him over to the three guys. “Ha-kun is Hak.” She told them.

“You guys aren’t real.” Hak said with a frown.

“We are so real.” The guy with green hair grumbled. “We’re just not alive.”

“Hak. Guen-Shuten-Abi.” Yona pointed to each person as she said the names.

“Why can we see you? The other kid couldn’t.” Hak asked.

“Don’t know why. Small children are more sensitive to spirits, but it’s not universal.” The blue-haired guy-Abi-answerered.

“Won new. We meet again.” Yona declared with absolute certainty.

“It’s too hot for this serious a conversation.” The guy with white hair, Guen, said.
“If you guys are ghosts, why are you even bothered by the heat?” Hak questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Hell if we know.” Shuten said, pulling his sweat-drenched hair off his neck with a grimace.

Introductions over, Hak found himself pulled around the garden to various points that Yona deemed important. While the flowers were pretty, he didn’t get what about a stone bench underneath a tree was so important. She climbed up onto it, giving him a look that clearly said he was to join her.

Sitting next to her, she started babbling intently, gesturing with her arms. “Okay…” Hak said, taking in her eager look.

She huffed, irritated at his lack of understanding, and decided to climb on top of him. Off balance, he found himself laying on the cool stone of the bench with her sprawled on top of him. Hugging onto him, Yona tucked her head underneath his chin with a yawn.

“Can’t I get up and play more?” Hak asked.

“No! Hak-low!”

Resigned to being stuck until she either woke up or her mother took pity and came over to get her off of him, Hak took in the leaves moving in the light breeze. There was a sound of flowing water trickling in the background, and Hak found it harder and harder to keep his eyes open.

Hak started when he felt a small hand on his cheek. Opening his eyes, he took in the red shades of evening and the lengthening shadows. Yona was smiling softly at him, her eyes impossibly old. “Yona happy. Hi’yu happy.”

“That’s nice; but can you let me up? I’m hungry.” Hak looked away as his face grew hot. He’d never, ever, say it out loud, but laying here with Yona was the closest he felt to home in a long time. He was truly happy, and for some reason, Hak was sure that ‘Ha-kun’, whoever that was, was happy too.

When Mundok came back to take him back to the Wind Tribe’s rooms, Yona was having none of it. “Hak stay!” She said with a glare, clinging to him like a monkey.

Mundok was shocked to see Hak tolerating this. “You sure, Hak?”

“I’ll be fine, just come back tomorrow Gramps.” Hak said.

“It’s Grandpa!” Mundok might have reacted more, but with Cheonsa in the room smiling serenely, he just left the two to their dinner.

Hak eyed Cheonsa out of the corner of his eye, impressed. “How’d you do that?” He asked.

“What do you mean?” She questioned, her smile widening slightly in a way that sent shivers down his spine.

Hak refocused on his food, not willing to push this lady that even Mundok was scared of. “Uhh…” He looked over to the three guys who had followed them inside.

“You see them?” Cheonsa asked gently.
“Yeah…who are they? Can you see them?” He asked.

Cheonsa shook her head. “No. They’ve been at her side since she was born. I can feel them, however.”

“But who are they?” He asked again.

“You’ll have to ask them.” Cheonsa answered, picking up the debris Yona left behind from eating.

“Like those three monkeys will tell me.” Hak grumbled.

“MONKEYS!??!!?” They roared, making Yona giggle.

“Cute!” She exclaimed, causing Hak and the three ghosts to look at her.

“…she’s got some weird ideas of cute, doesn’t she?” Hak said flatly.

“Definitely. Some things never change.” Abi answered.

Hak eyed him waiting for an explanation to this second statement, but none was forthcoming.

Yona lined up a white and a green stuffed dragon at the head of the futon, clinging to a crimson one as she sprawled on top of him again. “What’s with laying on me?” He demanded.

She just blinked at him sleepily, curling up on his chest instead of answering.

Hak groaned, squinting his eyes open.

There was a sun-man next to the futon. Blinking, the sun-man turned into a regular blond-haired guy. “Hak is Ha-kun.” Yona told the man.

“Turn out the sun.” Hak mumbled.

Since Yona had finally gotten off of him, Hak rolled over, pulling the quilt over his head to block out the light.

Hak was sure he had dreamed the sun-man, but Yona was holding a blue stuffed dragon in the morning, one he knew she hadn’t had the night before. “Where’d that come from?” Hak asked as he pulled on his robe.

“Zeno came!” She answered with a cheer, flinging her arms in the air.

‘…that blond guy?’ Hak asked. “Who feels like the sun?”

Yona nodded fiercely. Adding the blue dragon to the other three, she started naming them. “Hi’yu Haku’yu Ryo’yu Se’yu.”

“Yeah okay.” He shrugged off the naming.

“Hasn’t the old man told you of the birth myth of Kouka?” Abi asked. “Those are the dragons from the story, except for Ouryuu.”

“Nope.” He said, letting Yona lead him out of the room to the porch, where Cheonsa was waiting with breakfast.
“Me tell!” Yona cried.

“Yona, no one can quite understand what you say when you tell it.” Guen told her gently, who pouted in response.

“In the time of myth,” Cheonsa began. “The Crimson Dragon God, Hiryuu-kami descended from Heaven and took on human form. As King Hiryuu, he founded the Kingdom of Kouka. The people of that era were filled with hate and malice, forgetting the gods. Taken prisoner by those seeking power, Hiryuu was about to be killed, his four dragon brothers, Hakuryuu-kami, Seiryuu-kami, Ryokuryuu-kami and Ouryuu-kami, appeared. They urged Hiryuu to let them destroy all humans in punishment for their treatment of him and for having turned away from the gods.

“But Hiryuu refused. ‘I, too, am human now.’ He told them. ‘Even if they hate me and betray me, I cannot help but love them.’ While accepting his decision, the dragon gods could not bear to leave him unguarded. So each went in a direction of the compass, to seek a human whom they deemed worthy of receiving their power and becoming a warrior bound to Hiryuu. Hakuryuu-kami gave his warrior an arm with the strength of ten men. Seiryuu-kami bestowed eyes that could see vast distances and into the hearts of men. Ryokuryuu-kami granted to his warrior a leg that could leap up to the Heavens. And Ouryuu-kami gifted his warrior a sturdy body to act as a shield.

“With the four dragon warriors at his side, Hiryuu brought peace to the land. Each of the five of them founded a clan that developed into one of the five tribes today. With peace established, the dragon in Hiryuu’s soul grew weary, and went to its eternal rest. With their king and friend gone, the dragons each went separate ways, to keep the power they had been granted safe from those who would use them for evil.”

“Eh, accurate for the most part.” Guen commented. “The text ends with a prophecy saying that when darkness returns to the land, Hiryuu will be reborn and the dragons gathered again.”

“Hmmm…” Hak hummed as he took all this in. “I’d rather trust in my own power if bad stuff’s gonna happen, not just hope that some musty old guy is gonna show up.”

Veins started bulging in Shuten’s and Abi’s foreheads. Hak stuck his tongue out at them. Guen began clenching and unclenching his fist. Breathing deep, he turned and punched Shuten, sending him out into the garden. “WHAT THE HELL??!” Shuten roared, leaping at Guen with his spear at the ready.

“I’m not hitting a kid no matter how bratty he is!” Dodging, he grabbed Abi to use as a shield.

Abi squawked, reminding Hak of when he scared the chickens at the old man’s house. “Leave me out of it!” Pulling free, Abi ran into the garden, Guen and Shuten following.

“…are those monkeys always like this?” He asked Cheonsa, already acclimated to the chaos.

“‘ever and ever!” Yona answered with a grin. “Cute too!”

“Not sure I wanna know what else you think is cute.” Hak told her dryly.

Yona patted his arm. “Hak cute too.”

Cheonsa hid her smile with her sleeve as Hak turned bright red.

Omake (?)
Why Hiryuu was reborn as a girl

The four dragon warriors sat gathered outside the birthing room, where Hiryuu’s wife, Queen Ha-kun, was in labor. By all rights Hiryuu should have been with them, wearing a hole in the floor pacing, like Guen was, but Ha-kun had been adamant that Hiryuu see every part of the labor. While before their marriage brought the lands to the south-east into Kouka, she had been called the Lightning Dame for her blindingly fast strikes, her temper and mood swings throughout the pregnancy had earned her a new name: Thunder Lady (or Beast when everyone was completely sure she was out of earshot).

Oddly enough, Zeno, despite having no experience whatever regarding women, was the calmest of the four. “Everyone within five ri would come for me to help whenever the animals gave birth. They all swore the animals were calmer when I was there, and that the foals and calves and lambs were always healthier. Don’t think there was any truth to it, but it helped them, and there’d always be plenty of food to take back to the orphans.” Zeno explained, frowning as he practiced his brush strokes under Abi’s increasingly distracted gaze.

While Zeno could read fine, Abi had deemed his calligraphy to be in dire need of improvement.

“My family dumped small fortunes onto the nearest temple whenever one of Father’s or Elder Brother’s wives went into labor. I don’t think there was a confinement that was completely problem-free, however.” Abi commented, his glances to the door growing more frequent.

“Seiryuu, just stare at the door already!” Shuten complained, sharpening his spear.

He had brought most of the armory to sharpen, and was on the third pass through. “All I know ‘bout birthing is the girls would only get three days before they had to be back.”

Realizing that if he kept sharpening he’d wear the edge out faster, he switched to redoing the bindings on the spear heads. “Well, that and there can be a lot of blood. More than gutting a guy.”

Zeno looked queasy at the proposition.

“My ma was the local midwife. Before my sister was old enough, I’d get dragged along to help. I was tossed out when it was nearly over, but there were several times when the bleeding didn’t stop.” Guen said, his pacing speeding up. “And if the girl was too small, ma would loss both.”

“Ha-kun-sama will be okay, right?” Zeno asked, worried.

Screams echoed through the corridors. “DAMNIT HIRYUU I SWEAR IN THE NEXT LIFE I'M GOING TO GET YOU PREGNANT AND WE'LL SEE HOW WELL YOU HANDLE IT!!!!!”

There was a pause, probably Hiryuu answering, then the yelling returned. “DON'T YOU 'YES DEAR' ME!!!! IF YOU FAINT I'LL STAB YOU!”

What followed was a series of curses that had Shuten stealing Zeno’s paper and brush (‘Hey!’) to start writing them down. “Ummm…what she’s saying…isn't physically possible, is it?” Zeno asked, his eyes growing wider and wider as the curses got more inventive before cutting off into an ear-splitting screech.

The shrill cry of a newborn replaced the screech. “It better be a boy, cuz I don’t think the castle will survive a second pregnancy.” Guen prayed.

It was over an hour before they were allowed in to see the baby, Crown Prince Yak-shi. Ha-kun, while pale, appeared more even-tempered than she had in months.
Hiryuu, however, was a wreck. “I’m in one piece…somehow.” He said, eyes barely open.

“And you’ll stay in one piece as long as you keep your promise.” She declared, a dark smirk on her face.

“…we don’t want to know, do we?” Abi asked.

“Never figured you for a hen-pecked husband, King.” Shuten snickered.

Hiryuu blinked. “Hen-pecked? There’s no hens to peck me.”

“It’s a figure of speech, dear. Means you do whatever I say, no matter how embarrassing it is for you.” Ha-kun explained. “Now I know why they usually don’t let men into the birthing room. Complete wimps.”

Chapter End Notes

Not very imaginative naming, but it works.
Zeno sat in an unused corner of the apprentice priests’ dormitories, finishing up the stuffed yellow dragon. It had been a long time since there was enough apprentices for this room to be used, a situation that did not appear to be likely to change in the near future.

When he had played at being a priest all those years ago, he had never expected the position he created to play the role it had in Kouka politics. It was in one of its down swings of influence, so it would likely be another century or two before there would be enough apprentices to put this room back in use. It was a gamble to be sure, effectively squatting in Hiryuu Castle, but winters had been harsh the last couple years, and frostbite was something he preferred to avoid as much as possible.

That, and it was unexpectedly hard to stay away from Hiryuu’s reincarnation, Yona.

He had come the first time mostly out of curiosity. Making the stuffed crimson dragon…it felt like the right thing to do, to leave a token behind, even if Yona never knew where it came from. His plan when he sneaked into the room had been to simply take a look, leave the dragon, and leave.

The absolute last thing he expected was experiencing the awakening again when her eyes met his. The dim light that had floated on the edge of his conscious since the red star appeared in the sky flared into a torch, his blood boiling as the vow renewed itself to a new master.

It was less surprising that she seemed to recognize him. Promising four more dragons had been an impulse decision. Getting the right shade of crimson had been hard enough, but…

Feeling her baby-joy at a familiar face, and her longing for him to stay decided for him.

He had taken up in the dormitory then. It was close enough via hidden passage to the family quarters, as well as the kitchens and clothing workshops. Maids, or apprentice priests for that matter, didn’t even bother coming to dust, and the outrageousness of someone squatting inside the royal castle meant he felt moderately secure.

“Zeno really shouldn’t stay here…but it’s too hard to leave.” He commented, frowning down at one of the wings.

“Kaya can’t blame Zeno; she’s too cute!” Kaya chimed, somewhere to his right.

Feeling Kaya again, as well as Guen, Abi, and Shuten had been another surprise. Had Yona not expressly pointed at each spot and naming them, he may well have thought he had imagined it. But Kaya never left. It wasn’t long (for someone who’d been around as long as him anyway) before he could get a sense of her words when she touched him, and then he heard her voice again.

Zeno glanced over to Kaya, smiling, before turning back to his stitches. He froze, and looked back. “Ka…ya?”

He could see her.

She was kind of blurry on the edges, but she was visible.

He hadn’t hallucinated her voice and presence after all.
“Zeno…can see Kaya?” She asked, shuffling closer to rest a hand on his cheek.

He nodded, throat tight as tears welled up. Setting aside the nearly finished dragon, he reached for her, stopping shy of her hair. Tears of her own started as she placed her other hand on his other cheek, cupping his face. “I’m here Zeno.” She whispered.

“Kaya, I’m sor-“ A finger to his lips cut him off.

“Kaya doesn’t need any apologies. Without you, I’d have died alone, with no one ever knowing I was gone. I didn’t die afraid as I strained to breathe, choking on my blood. I died warm and loved and happier than I’d ever been. So please, don’t apologize for anything.” She told him, resting her forehead on his as their tears fell.

“…Z-I still should have told you something, before the end…” He whispered, gazing at the ground.

“Maybe because I was dying…sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I’d see scales on your skin. Then it wasn’t just out of the corner of my eye, but something that vanished as soon as I was aware of it. At the end…you glowed like the sun, and your figure was overlaid with Ouryuu-kami.”

He started at this last bit. “Ouryuu…?”

“He came for me.” It was Kaya’s turn to look down. “He told me…he had seen what Hiryuu-kami would do, before he ever conceived of it. So he planned ahead, picking a baby who could hear the gods. The power of the dragons would be needed at least once more beyond that time, but all four were inherited legacies…there needed to be someone to carry the knowledge of that time forward. And he was curious too, what Hiryuu-kami saw in humans, but he couldn’t bear the thought of joining his brother on Earth without either of them able to defend themselves. He couldn’t save me… because once he was inside of you, he had no way of telling you anything.”

She looked back up at Zeno’s startled face. “When he conceived of giving a human his body, he never thought you would change him as much as he changed you.”

“…so the part about the warriors becoming the other halves of the dragons…is literal in my case?” Zeno asked.

“As far as I can understand. He…he was able to let be stay at your side without turning into a possessing spirit, because in life you had shared some of your power with me, without realizing it.” Kaya answered, blushing at the end.

Zeno blushed too at the implication. “You’ve…been at my side ever since…?”

“Yes.” She said simply.

He paled at her answer and what it implied. She had seen when loneliness drove him to tear himself to shreds, the various ways he had killed himself-or been killed-over the years, the frankly stupid experiments he had done, testing the limits, partly out of boredom, partly out of curiosity, and partly hoping one of them would work.

“Zeno is not doing this.” She said sternly, turning his face back to her. “If any of that had scared me off, I wouldn’t be here now. I cried with you, and held you even though you couldn’t feel it, and dove into your dreams to help create some happiness for you, even if the details faded when you woke. I love you, Zeno. I am your wife, and like how you stayed with me until my body was bones, I will stay with you until we can both go above the skies.”

“Kaya…” He could only whisper, reaching for her and stopping shy of hugging her. “…Zeno can’t
“Yes…Kaya doesn’t know why. But you can touch Kaya back in your dreams tonight, after you give the dragon to Yona.” She promised him.

She was flying through the sky, him-her keeping her steady on top of dragon-them. Alongside them were the other dragons, with only the yellow dragon bearing a single rider instead of a pair. But then the rider on the yellow dragon was the yellow dragon, and a girl nearly as bright as her sun took his place.

The younger of the pair on the green dragon was ignoring the elder, shuffling so far forward that he was practically between the dragon’s horns. Scowling, the elder did nothing to draw him back, but kept careful watch over him anyway.

The boy on the blue dragon spent as much time looking baffled at all of them as staring ahead, the wind on his unhidden face an unknown pleasure. The man steadying him had a bittersweet smile on his face at the younger’s joy.

The boy on the white dragon looked up starry-eyed at the elder of the pair, asking questions so fast the elder could only look at him puzzled. This drew a scowl from the boy on the green dragon, and the boy on the white dragon started yelling at him. The elders on the green and white dragons just shook their heads, exchanging bemused smiles.

A new dragon, as dark as Ha-kun and Hak’s hair, fell into place beside her, Hak insisting to Ha-kun that he didn’t need to be steadied and her telling him she didn’t care if he fell. But the steadying hand on Hak’s back, and how he made no effort to move it, said otherwise.

“I can’t wait to meet all of them.” She told him-her. “Cuz they’re mine, not yours-mine.”

“You sure you don’t want to share?” Him-her asked, bemused in the way adults usually were with her.

“The past is the past, and it’s enough to carry the memories forward as new bonds are made.” She turned back to him-her with a sly look. “Besides, yours can only give people the chills, not beat them up.”

There was general sense of outrage from the elders as him-her laughed, Hak and Ha-kun shared identical dark smirks, and the yellow dragon and his girl-no, the rider of the yellow dragon and his girl- tried and failed not to giggle as the dream faded.

Her sun was close by, the murmur of his voice talking to Guen and Abi and Shuten forming into words. “…never thought I’d feel all of you again, let alone see you.”

She sat up with a yawn. “Zeno…?” It was cold as she crawled out of her cocoon of blankets, but Zeno was more than warm enough to serve as a substitute. “Cold.”

“The miss should have stayed in bed if she’s cold.” He said as she crawled into his lap, letting her cling to his side as he wrapped his cloak around both of them.

“Zeno here.” She said, looking up at him. Why stay in bed if Zeno was here?

If she was on top of him, he’d stay longer.
“You know you’re her favorite.” Guen mock-grumbled.

“Only because she doesn’t see Zeno every day like you three.” He answered.

Poking around at his tunic, she uncovered the last stuffed dragon, the yellow one. Clinging to him, she asked, “Zeno no more come?”

“Hm? Why does Miss say that?” He looked down at her, confused.

“All of ‘em.” She gestured to the four dragons curled up in her blankets with her new yellow one.

She should get back in the blankets before they got cold, but it was hard to let go of Zeno.

“Well…” Her sun started, humming. “Would the Miss mind if Zeno came without a present?”

“Zeno IS present.” She informed him with a frown.

He had been so sad and so lonely for so long, just him here with her, if not happy-happy at least content, was enough of a gift.

“Zeno can’t keep away from Yona, and neither can Kaya.” Her sun’s sun commented, crouching close.

“Listen to Kaya!” Yona exclaimed, grabbing for Kaya’s sleeve and frowning as her hand passed through, like when her three spirits fought over dangling things for her to try and grab, only for her hand to pass through.

“Yes, listen to your wife, you hen-pecked husband.” Shuten said with a snicker.

“Where hens?” Yona asked him, Kaya snuggling up next to Zeno with her between them. “No hens here.”

Something about the phrase was familiar, even more so when her trio of spirits and Zeno smothered laughs.

Closing her eyes, Yona basked in the presence of him-her dragons, her sun and her sun’s sun. Her parents floated warm out of sight, along with Won, and Hak was off to the south-east.

“Yona happy. Hiwryuu happy.” She whispered to herself as she fell back asleep as her spirits and Zeno continued talking, the murmur of their voices a lullaby.

It would be better if her dragons were beside her, but she could find them in her dreams. And that was enough for now.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes I did cry writing the Zeno/Kaya bit.
The boy known as Seiryuu found himself in a place that didn’t look like anything he’d see around the village, or the ruins they went to after he killed the soldiers. It was a field of flowers, closed for the night, with fireflies flitting around, the full moon shading everything blue. There was a blue mass off in the distance, but he couldn’t tell how far away it was.

Feeling the wind on his face, his eyes widened as he frantically started looking for his mask. Whatever force had brought him to this place had taken his mask too!

“Hi!”

He barely registered the small girl with bright red hair entering his space before he closed his eyes, turning to crouch facing away from her.

Yona took in the blue-haired boy before her, trembling the way she usually did when she saw Uncle Yuhon. Carefully, she walked around him, crouching down in front of him.

He had covered his eyes with his hands too. “What’s wrong?”

“…my mask…” He said after a long time, long enough for her to think she wouldn’t get an answer. “…it’s not here…without it…people get hurt when they see my eyes…”

“Do you have to think about hurting people with your eyes, or is the mask the only thing that stops them?” She asked tilting her head.

Abi’s eyes didn’t work like that, but it might be different when you’re born with them and not just given them one day.

“…have to want to…” He admitted.

“…if I promise not to look at you, will you open them? The fireflies are too pretty dancing among the flowers for you to miss them.” She finally proposed. “I’ll sit behind you, so I won’t be tempted to look.”

Somehow he felt like he could trust her to do what she said. The grass rustled, and he jumped as she sat with her back leaning on his. “It’s really pretty to see them as far as you can see. And here I don’t get bored watching them like at home.” She said.

Tentatively, he raised his head from his hands and opened his eyes. It was pretty, and beyond the blue mass far away, the field did go on and on, with nothing interrupting it.

Turning, he saw the bright red hair again. Catching the end of her sleeve, he started at the feel. “…soft…”

“I think Mama called it ‘silk’. I know there’s a bunch of different things clothes can be made from, but all my clothes are silk for some reason.” She explained. “Abi says it’s cuz I’m ‘royalty’, but it just confuses me when he tried explaining what that is.”

“….?”
“Abi’s been watching me since I was REALLY little, and before I was me. He has pretty blue hair like yours, but it’s longer, and the birds really like him.”

“Like mine?” The old person he’d seen with hair the color of his was Ao, and that sad man who was sometimes in the corner of the hut that Ao never reacted to.

“Yep. And there’s Guen, with white hair like snow. He’s always fighting with Shuten, who has hair as green as grass, but they’re not really trying to hurt each other. Abi tries to stay out of it, but he gets dragged in anyway. Mama and Papa have black hair, and so does Hak, but Won has light brown hair, and Zeno has yellow hair like the buttercups.”

“They’re…friends?”

“Everyone but Mama and Papa. And you’re my friend too.” She said, placing her hand on his.

“…you can’t…no one will be my friend…even when my eyes hadn’t hurt people…” He told her.

“Well I’m your friend. And my friends are your friends too.” She said like she was making a ‘declaration’, like was sometimes ‘read’ in the village.

“They…won’t be scared…?” It was hard to believe there could be more people like this girl, who wouldn’t be scared of his eyes.

“They’re not scared of anything! If they were here they’d convince you, but I don’t know how to get them to come here with us. The only one I usually see here is him-me.”

“Him-me?”

“He’s me, or I was him at some point a super long time ago, but now we’re different people, but since I was still him at some point, he’s him-me.”

“…I don’t get.” He was sort of scared of telling his ‘friend’ that, but he really didn’t get it.

“I confuse myself. I know what I mean, but there’s no way to explain it.” She assured him, before standing. “Wanna race over there?”

She pointed at the blue mass. “Last one’s a rotten egg!” She shouted as she took off running and giggling.

He was following her before he knew it. Drawing even with her, she grabbed his hand. Looking at her violet eyes, he felt himself smiling.

And, somehow, not having his mask didn’t bother him anymore. Like his eyes could never hurt her.

The blue mass turned into a dragon as they drew close. It was bigger than anything he’d ever seen, and he slowed to the point where the girl was pulling him along. “Hi blue brother; keeping him safe?” She asked of the dragon as they approached.

The red marks under the dragon’s eyes looked like the ones on Ao’s face, and as it cracked an eye open, there was nothing but white. For a moment he felt like he was looking at them look at him, then it was back to normal. “Of course. Did you expect otherwise?” The dragon’s voice seemed to rumble through him.

“Nope!” She said with a grin. “He’s one of your favorites, among those who’ve had your eyes.”

He wondered what she meant by that.
“It’s inappropriate to have favorites, especially since I’d have wiped out the clan hundreds of years ago.” The dragon said. “How a sense of duty towards them arose I’ll never understand, given the treatment.”

“Liar.” She scolded (!) the dragon. “You knew when you picked Abi, and you know every time the power must be passed on. All of you have a fondness for at least some humans, and you wouldn’t let a power like that go to someone who’d misuse it.”

The dragon sighed, ruffling their hair. “Why is it my chosen have all-seeing eyes, yet you see what even those cannot?”

“Ouryuu is not the only one as changed by his chosen as much as he changed his chosen.” The girl answered simply, pulling him with her as she sat where the dragon’s arm joined the body.

The skin of the dragon felt like nothing he’d ever encountered before. Plus it was warm, like when Ao reluctantly held him during the night in winter. The girl snuggled against his side. “Can’t wait for this to be real.” She said.

Somehow, he didn’t have to ask what she meant by that. “…yeah.”

“Once we meet for real, let’s watch the fireflies dancing under the moon in the flowers again, alright?” She suggested, leaning her head back to look him in the eye.

“…alright…”

Without opening his eyes, the boy called Seiryuu knew he had left that field with the dragon and the red-haired girl. Shivering as he slowly crawled out of his blanket to begin watching the edge of the ruins, he remembered how it felt, being with someone who wasn’t scared of him, and couldn’t help smiling slightly.

He couldn’t wait for it to be real too.

“Mine is the only one of the old generation still left.” Shuten said with a sigh, flopping on Zeno’s bed in the room he was squatting in.

“How old is he?” Abi asked absently, keeping watch on Yona at her lessons.

Cheonsa, now that Yona was three, had made it abundantly clear that they were to make themselves scarce during her lessons. Not that they were much beyond basic stuff, but she was still intimidating enough for them to obey.

Kaya, however, was deemed ‘well-behaved’ enough to be allowed to stay. She couldn’t help laughing at the expressions on the others’ faces when they were informed of that fact.

“…thirty-eight…?” Shuten said tentatively. “The new one’s twelve, and he was twenty-five-ish when Jaeha was born.”

“Zeno’s sorry he didn’t break him out. But at his age, he’ll want to save himself.” Zeno apologized.

“You can cut the apologies you know.” Guen complained, idly watching a spider in the corner.

Zeno opened his mouth to apologize for that, but thought better of it and closed his mouth. “That’s the longest any of the dragons have lasted since the three of you, right?” He asked.
“Yes.” Abi confirmed. “Usually they don’t live more than four or five years after their successor is born, so most don’t reach thirty-five.”

“Wonder why?” Zeno mused.

“Old and decrepit warriors would be of no use. I started slowing down on the fighting around thirty-five.” Shuten remarked.

“Yeah, slowing down, not stopping.” Guen pointed out. “Not like that much slowing down was required; we all had perfect health until our successors were born.”

“Maybe your old one is hanging on until the new one can survive after escaping?” Zeno proposed. “A twelve-year old would be able to survive on the road better than a younger child.”

Shuten made a face. “I don’t think I can give him that much credit. He—“ He cut off suddenly.

“?” Was the general response of the others.

“Time for an ass-whooping.” Shuten said as he stood, grabbing his spear before he faded out.

“Guess his old one finally gave up.” Guen commented. “If only all of mine would stop haunting the successor. Though Kija seems strong enough to hold them off.”

“Her mother’s lessons are over,” Abi said. “Time for ours.”

Jaeha soared above the earth, so high as to be amidst the clouds. Crimson teased the corner of his eye, and turning his head, he looked at the small girl he was carrying on his back. “Told you I could get this high.” He boasted.

“She called him with a giggle. “But you’re too happy at being unchained to touch the ground for long.”

He should have been surprised at her insightful statement, but it felt par for the course for this girl. “I wanna see all of Kouka, and then see places beyond the horizon.”

“If you get too far from Hiryuu Castle, the dragon’s power will weaken, and you might not make it back.” She informed him, her face impossibly sad and impossibly ancient at the same time. “I know you’ve just broken your chains, and don’t want another one…”

He really didn’t, but cheering her up was more important than raging at the unfairness the dragon’s blood heaped on him. “If I go to port towns, then people and things from beyond the horizon can come to me.” He pointed out. “And even with avoiding the others, there’s still probably more in Kouka than I can ever see in the time I have. It’s kinda surprising the old guy reached thirty, let alone to near forty.”

“Without being bound to a master, the dragon’s power is more than a human’s body and soul can bear for more than a few decades.” She said. “I know you don’t want to meet me, but you might have more time than you think.”

“Huh?” Jaeha was baffled at her statement. “Haven’t we met already?”

She laughed. “My silly dragon, everyone can meet everyone in dreams. But it’s not meeting until we look into each other’s eyes and the blood boils.”

“Well if you’re gonna be such a cute girl in real life, then it wouldn’t be so bad, meeting you.” He
declared, laughing as her face turned as red as her hair.

Jaeha yawned as he stretched, taking in the sunrise. “The first day of freedom.” He commented to himself, smiling.

Closing his eyes, he felt for the other dragons. Hakuryuu was in the mountains on the northern border like always; Seiryuu was now in the same mountain range as Hakuryuu, only farther east, and Ouryuu was in the capital, near a red light that kept flickering. “Well…I want to see the ocean, so west it is.” He said, pushing off the tree he spent the night in to join the clouds, away from the other dragons.

“Hey, Zeno?” Yona asked one night in winter. “Do you think I’ll get to meet my dragons?”

“Aren’t Zeno and his brothers your dragons?” He asked, still holding the yellow and green stuffed dragons he had been using to act out some story involving him and Shuten.

Shuten had started out moving the green dragon, but he couldn’t do it for long.

“You are. But you’re the only one that’s mine-mine, not him-mine.” She answered, rolling over to lay on her front.

“‘Him-mine’?” The ghosts and Zeno shared a look.

“Who I was before.” She elaborated, resting her chin on her crimson dragon. “All of you, but Kaya, are here because of who I was before. Even though you’re mine-mine…you first came because of him-me. And if Kaya wasn’t bound to you, she wouldn’t be here either.”

“Yona,” Guen started gently, moving to rest a hand on her hair. “Who you were before may be the reason all of us came initially, but who you are now is why we stay.”

“He’s right.” Shuten agreed, making a face at having to agree with Guen. “That senile king might be why you caught our interest, but it’s you who we want to spend time with now.”

She smiled briefly at Shuten calling him-her ‘senile’. “But…does it matter who I am now…if who I was will define everything?”

“What do you mean?” Abi asked, kneeling opposite Guen.

“…the only reason I got to know all of you is because of who I was. I’d have met Ha-kun—Hak—again anyway, but I would have never known all of you, and would never have the chance to meet my dragons, were it not for him, and the dragon gods.” Yona frowned. She was starting to get mixed up. “Everything’s mixing up.”

Sensing her confusion, Shuten, Zeno, and Kaya gathered around her with Abi and Guen. She crawled out of bed to climb into Zeno’s lap as everyone came together in a group hug.

“Why are you wondering if you’ll get to meet your other dragons?” Kaya asked quietly, the fingers running through her hair the faintest breeze.

“…I’ve seen Seiryuu and Ryokuryuu in my dreams.” She admitted. “Seiryuu is so lonely, and so is Ryokuryuu, even though he hides it. Hakuryuu is probably lonely too. I don’t want to leave them alone for too long, but I don’t know when I’ll ever get to leave and find them…”
She rested an ear over Zeno’s heart. “Wanna feel everyone inside…” She whispered as she fell back asleep. She had inadvertently channeled Hiryuu in order to be able to say everything in a way everyone would understand, and the effort left her spiritually worn out.

“…I knew she remembered at least some things from when she was Hiryuu, but I didn’t realize it went this deep.” Abi finally said.

“It sounds to Zeno like the miss is hoping everything she is now isn’t overwhelmed by the past.” Zeno suggested. “He’s not sure what she means by feeling everyone inside.”

“Hiryuu-sama could never feel us the way we felt each other.” Guen commented. “Maybe crossing from Heaven to Earth again lets her feel us. Well, feel Zeno at least.”

“I know he’d get info from dreams, but it sounds like she’s meeting the current generation in their dreams, which doesn’t make sense.” Shuten complained.

“It’s hard to really know, isn’t it?” Kaya asked. “None of us are dragons who became human, died and were reborn. We may have to wait until she’s older, and is more used to handling her two selves to really know. But it sounds like ‘Hiryuu’ still exists as an entity separate from ‘Yona’, enough to where she can feel the difference, and she’s worried about losing herself.”

“Not sure I really get it.” Guen commented as Zeno began the delicate process of getting Yona off of him and back into her own bed without her waking up enough to realize and cling on.

“You’re not supposed to remember who you were in your past life, right?” Shuten asked. “Without some sorta mediation shit anyway.”

“I don’t think so. It’s said that déjà vu is you getting a sense of doing something similar in a past live, but…” Abu trailed off, unsure of what to say.

“She knew us. After the awakening, Zeno could feel that she recognized me.” He said, managing to work Yona back into her bed, curling the blankets around her form and setting the four dragons at each corner of the futon, with her holding the crimson one as she slept.

“So…we won’t know jack-shit until she’s older and can sort everything out.” Shuten summed up. “I need a drink.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m thinking in dreams Yona wouldn’t be hampered by an inability to clearly communicate what she means, while in the waking world, she has to channel Hiryuu in order to communicate clearly, since she IS only three.
Kija opened his eyes to an endless snow-covered field, with more gently falling down. Holding his human hand out, he took in the sight of snowflakes falling onto his hand and melting. All the sound seemed muffled, like when he had the blankets pulled over his head. Well, maybe not completely muffled, but it seemed like any sound would be quieter than it would be without snow.

Hearing a girl giggle behind him, he turned to get a face full of snow. Coughing as he brushed the snow from his face, he saw the culprit was a small, crimson-haired girl, grinning broadly.

He knew there was something about her hair color that was important, but it didn’t matter as she started making another snowball. “Snowball fight!” She shouted, throwing her new snowball.

Somehow he dodged, and began making one to throw back at her. He made sure to throw it with his human hand, not sure how much damage snow could do when thrown with the strength of ten men.

She shrieked as it hit her chest, giggling as she threw another one. Her giggles were contagious, and he found himself laughing as they continued throwing snowballs at each other.

All too soon they were soaked and panting, leaning on a huge white, warm mass that he didn’t recall seeing when he first arrived at the field, yet he couldn’t place when it appeared.

“That was fun!” He cheered. “More fun than it looked when I was watching the other kids play.”

“They didn’t let you join? Ma-mother doesn’t like me playing with Hak and Won when they’re throwing snowballs, mostly because she’s worried they’ll ‘play rough’ and might hurt me by accident.” She said. “Do they not like you?”

“I’m the one with the dragon’s arm, so when it’s snowy or rainy Baa-Baa and Mother don’t like me going outside if I don’t have to, so I don’t get sick.” He told her. “And I think the other kids would be too worried about offending the dragon gods by throwing snow at one of their warriors.”

“I don’t think snow or rain would make a dragon get sick.” She said with a frown. “Wouldn’t it be really petty if the dragon gods got bothered by someone throwing snow at you?”

“Maybe…” Kija had to concede. “But it’s the sacred dragon warrior power, handed down from the time of myth! Can’t blame them for wanting to be careful!” He gestured with his dragon hand for emphasis.

“I’m not blaming them for being careful.” The girl said with a blink. “But it can’t be healthy to only think and do stuff related to the dragons. What do you like to do for fun? And by fun I mean something that has nothing to do with dragons or Hiryuu or the dragon’s arm.”

What DID he like to do for fun? His brow furrowed as he thought about it. “…does it count if I find the stuff relating to the dragons fun?”

“Nope.”

“…I can’t think of anything…” He said, disappointed he was letting this girl down by not liking stuff that had nothing to do with his power or his duty.
“When we meet for real we can think of something together.” She promised. “I like playing with Hak and Won, and listening to stories Mother and Father and Zeno tell. And Guen and Shuten and Abi are cute when they fight with each other, like baby dragons play fighting. I know I said fun is something that has nothing to do with dragons, but my favorite story is the birth myth.” She admitted sheepishly.

“How come? I like hearing the parts about the first Hakuryuu, but mostly it’s just battles he fought in with the others.” He asked her, relieved to have some common ground.

“I can see everything playing out when I close my eyes.” She answered, closing her eyes with a smile. “And even though it’s not my memory, I like thinking of how becoming human on a whim was more rewarding than dragon-me or him-me ever thought.”

Opening her eyes, her eyes seemed ancient, “And…I like seeing everyone again, and how much Kouka has changed since those times. No matter the tragedies, no matter the heartache…I can’t help loving humans, and I can’t help loving being human.”

“You were always the odd one.” The white mass rumbled, shifted to reveal itself to be a white dragon, missing the right arm. “Suppose it comes from being a fire-aligned dragon.”

“Dragon-me was still born from a river like the rest of you.” The girl pointed out (reminded?) the dragon with a pout.

“Yes; a river of lava.” Somehow this felt like an old argument to Kija.

“I do like calligraphy.” He suddenly said. “Mostly because it took a lot to get hang of writing with my left hand, since I poke myself with my claws when I write with my right hand too much for it to be comfortable for long.”

“See? There is something you like doing that doesn’t relate to the dragons.” The girl beamed at him, and he found his face growing hot and his heart beating faster.

“Can…” He felt bashful as he began his request. “Can we have a snowball fight again someday?”

“Yup! And not just here; we can have one for real, with all the others. If it was this much fun with two people, it should be a hundred times more fun with more people. Though it might be tricky, since Ryokuryuu will jump too high for us to hit while he pelts us.” The girl promised.

“Ryo-? Wait, are you-?” Suddenly it hit him, why her hair color was important.

The ancient look returned to her eyes. “I want to be your friend, not your master. No matter what the bond of the dragon’s blood says.”

Kija woke up later than he usually did, even with Baa-Baa coming to wake him up later. It had snowed more in the night, and it was still snowing. Listening to the other children laughing as they played in the snow, for once he didn’t feel jealous.

The snowy field and the girl with crimson hair and ancient eyes would always be waiting for him.

Shuten was in a crabby mood. His successor (in every sense of the word) got to play at being a pirate, but he was stuck learning to read. “Damn senile kings with eyes that make you want to do anything no matter how troublesome.” He grumbled, scowling at what to him will always be a mass of squiggly lines.
“This is what you get for not bothering with it when you were still alive. Hiryuu-sama just never forced the issue.” Abi declared, watching over Shuten and Yona as they worked through the text of the birth myth.

Yona’s instructor had her reading nursery rhymes and poems, and she was having too much fun memorizing them to demonstrate that she could already read them easily. “The hard point is a bunch of the characters have shifted over the centuries, so what I remember doesn’t match up with now.” Yona said. “At least the trend was to simply them and reduce the stroke count.”

“Yeah, every couple of centuries Zeno would visit a temple for a while, to see how much had changed.” Zeno chimed in, sprawled out on the porch near them.

At five, Yona had more time alone, with Hak and Su-won off learning to fight for much of what had been their joint playtime.

The look on Hak’s face when he realized Su-won was in fact a boy was priceless.

“But you’re getting better Shuten!” Yona assured him.

“Why are you making me learn to read now?” He asked, his tone what everyone but him would call a whine.

“One, so I can have a partner in misery.” She said with a sly look. “Two, I want all three of you to snoop in the library for books on different stuff. Abi can pick out the ones on politics and history cuz he likes that stuff, Guen will find the economic ones since he’s the best with numbers, and I want you to look for good ones on war strategy and battle analysis, since you were the best commander.” She explained. “All of you are good enough at moving stuff to be able to flip through the pages.”

Shuten couldn’t help flushing a little at being called the best commander. “Not sure I can tell which books would be good ones.”

“Clarity of thought is the important factor.” Guen commented. “But how are you going to explain reading books like that? None of those topics would be typical for a girl to read, let alone a princess.”

“Easy; I’ll hide them inside poetry books!” She said.

“…I’m doubtful that could work, yet at the same time I know she’ll make it work.” Shuten complained.

“Looks like Hak and Su-won are done with training for today.” Abi told them. “How come you don’t watch them? You should be able to pick up some things by watching.”

“…it’s Uncle Yuhon.” Yona said. “I just can’t feel comfortable around him. I don’t know why, but…when I see him, all I can picture is him about to strike me down. Both him-me and me-me.” She shivered, remembering the bloodlust and hate. “Since he randomly shows up to guide Hak and Su-won’s training…I don’t want to chance it.”

It seemed so natural for her to mention things that related to Hiryuu that it was hard to remember at times that she kept him separate from herself. “He DOES seem familiar from that time.” Guen commented, having actually been present when Hiryuu was about to be executed and the dragon gods descended. “The relation isn’t hitting me though.”

“Maybe you’ll grow out of the fear as you get older?” Kaya proposed, having been reading along with Yona and Shuten.
“I can’t forget someone showing that much hatred towards me as they move to end my life.” An ancient, pained look crossed her eyes as she stood, and ran to go meet Hak and Su-won before they reached her.

“Zeno can’t forget those who attacked him out of genuine malice either.” Zeno commented as he retreated back into the hidden passage, taking some sweet buns with him.

“Those who went after Zeno because of his power…they are the ones in the nightmares.”

“Kaya’s nightmares too,” Kaya agreed. “Fear is one thing, but for someone to attack with such malice, or hoping to gain something…those were the worst to watch. More than Zeno ripping himself to pieces, or that time he decided lava swimming was a good idea.”

Zeno looked sheepish as he remembered the lava swimming incident. “What about when Zeno went walking on the sea floor?”

“Now, that was interesting, more because of all the animals down there than that Zeno can not breathe if he wants.” Kaya said flatly, looking longingly at the sweet bun.

“…want to make sweet buns tonight?” He suggested, noticing her look. “Though Zeno isn’t sure why he can remember his dreams with Kaya now that he can hear and see her again.”

“Probably because Zeno knows it’s real to some degree now, and not something his mind made up.” Kaya proposed.

Zeno shrugged, licking his fingers.

Abi sighed as he left the library. Most of the books on history and politics were a little too advanced for a five year old, no matter how much knowledge she could pull on. “Maybe her instructor will have a child’s version of history for her to learn. She can’t be completely ignorant of her heritage.” He hoped with a sigh as he passed the king’s private office. “-want me as heir?”

Abi paused at those words. It was Yona’s father, Il with her grandfather King Ju-nam. Slipping inside, he saw father and son sitting across from each other at the low table by the window. “Yes. I’ve been working on the generals, so I did not say anything until I was sure your ascension would be supported.” Ju-nam confirmed.

“But why?” Abi was as confused as Il looked.

“The reason that will be publically made is that Yuhon would be far more valuable to Kouka as purely a military leader and not a king, and it is the sovereign’s right to name his successor, no matter birth order. First born to first born is merely custom, not law. But there is more to it than that.” Ju-nam sighed. “Do you remember the incident involving the Xing prisoners?”

“I’m amazed that it has been kept quiet here. I would have thought someone would have broken ranks and said something.” Il remarked.

Xing incident?

“It was a small enough group responsible for a group oath of silence to the throne of Kouka to be effective. The consequences for breaking the oath are also enough to ensure silence. But, in order to get Xing to the treaty table, I promised that Yuhon, any of his children and any of his grandchildren, would not inherit the throne.” Ju-nam revealed.
“Even Su-won? He’s too kind-hearted to consider an action like what Yuhon did.” Il asked, surprised.

“You would be right, except he idolizes his father, and his kind heart masks a core of steel.” Ju-nam explained.

“Beheading prisoners who had surrendered, regardless of rank, and returning the heads to the gates of Xing’s capital…it’s not only a breach of the understood rules of war, but an international political gaffe. I had thought terms we dictated were unusually light, given the causality numbers, but this explains it.”

Abi froze. Such an action had not been conducted since the time of the founding of Kouka! Wait… the name of the commander who ordered the same done to Hiryuu-sama’s army, and used the shock value of depositing hundreds of heads at the gate to storm the castle and capture Hiryuu-sama… hadn’t his name been Yuhon?

“It is not in the treaty terms, but as I am now revealing the promise to you my successor, my counterpart in Xing will do the same. I swore in the name of Hiryuu, our most serious oath, and Xing knows this.” Ju-nam continued. “But not only because of that, but if you are heir, the throne can pass to Yona in turn.”

“The priest’s prophecy.” Il stated. “During the divination performed at her presentation to the clan and the dragon gods.”

Ju-nam simply nodded.

“…Yuhon will not be happy.” Il finally said.

“He will be reminded that he cannot say the sovereign is the highest power in the land and then disobey his sovereign when he does not like the command.” Ju-nam answered sternly. “You have always been the better politician. Keep the peace between the clans and with other nations. Land can be regained. The kingdom cannot if it falls. Even if the kingdom is reduced to its smallest borders… even if the people are unhappy and starving…do not do anything that will endanger the existence of Kouka. I pray to the dragon gods that Yuhon has disavowed that such a fate does not befall our people. But we will not know how dark the darkness will become until the dawn has broken.”

“…as you command, Your Majesty.” Il finally acknowledged, bowing low to his father.

The reaction of Guen, Shuten, Zeno and Kaya was stunned silence, when Abi had finished relaying what he had overheard. “…no wonder Yona is terrified of him.” Guen finally said. “I had thought the name was a coincidence, but with the knowledge of something similar happening to Xing…”

“Even with his belief in the supremacy of the sovereign, I doubt Yuhon will take this calmly.” Shuten noted.

“We’ll need to keep a close eye on Yona. And Yuhon. Ju-nam’s health is declining, so we cannot discount Yuhon attempting something against Yona. Il is too healthy for sudden illness to be believable, but a child?” Zeno’s eyes were dark, the way they were in battle after the dragon’s power fully activated and his scales appeared. “Unfortunately…I don’t think an assassination can be pulled off successfully on Yuhon.”

“…y’know, it’s really, really freaky when you get blunt like this.” Guen commented after several minutes of silence.
“You missed the more ruthless politics during Yak-shi’s dotage and his grandson’s minority.” Zeno answered. “And such a tactic has been used with varying degrees of success in the past. There were at least ten successful assassinations and many more unsuccessful ones that I know of over the centuries, and numerous incidents that are too suspicious for assassination to be ruled out.”

“But if there’s a prophecy in play, wouldn’t that shield her?” Shuten asked.

“It’ll keep her alive. It won’t keep her in one piece physically.” Zeno pointed out.

“Cheonsa-sama is wary of Yuhon.” Kaya remarked. “I can’t say why, but there’s something to their interactions that strikes me as her being cautious around him.”

“Okay, enough serious talk, you three go back to the Miss so Zeno can go to bed. Zeno and Kaya are making sweet buns tonight.” Zeno declared, changing into nightclothes he had stolen from somewhere.

“Is THAT what it’s called now?” Shuten questioned with a leer, having noticed Kaya’s blush when Zeno was being serious.

Zeno was nonplussed. “If you’re that desperate go haunt the red light district. Or I’m ripping off your dragon leg and beating you with it.”

Trading looks, Guen and Abi grabbed one of Shuten’s arms and hauled him out of the room, Kaya giving a little wave as her blush increased to the point where it could have stood in for Yona’s hair.

“Seriously, go visit your favorite in Heaven if you’re that desperate.” Guen pointed out. “Not all my absences are checking up on Kija after all.”

“She reincarnated more than sixty years ago.” Shuten moped. “The worst part is she’s playing mama bear to Jaeha. And I don’t like the others that much.”

Abi made the mistake of looking at Guen, which made both of them burst out laughing. Growling, Shuten charged them, spear at the ready.

Jolted awake by the noise, Yona squinted at the three of them through the screens leading to the porch, left open to bring in some breeze in the hot summer night. Deciding she was better off not questioning it, she rolled over and hugged her yellow dragon as she went back to sleep, the other four keeping guard at the corners of the futon.

Chapter End Notes

I like making everything connect. Raise your hand in the comments if you find serious!blunt!Zeno as sexy as me and Kaya do.
It was the autumn equinox when King Ju-nam breathed his last. With Il his named successor, the approval of the generals was a formality after all the politicking done before Ju-nam’s death. Yuhon, magnanimous in public over being passed over, quietly seethed.

He had chased the priests from the castle, true enough, but the very fact his father had put faith in their serpent’s words and named Il heir based on his daughter’s hair color was proof enough that it meant nothing.

Cheonsa bowed slightly to Zeno as he slipped his hand into her daughter’s before she realized it was empty. The past several months, Yona had been unable to fall asleep without holding her mother’s hand. Cheonsa knew it was the result of a terrible nightmare involving her death, but the details were something she couldn’t bring Yona to repeat.

Sliding the doors shut behind her, she had only gone a couple yards when she encountered Yuhon, who hardly bothered hiding the naked sword in his hand. “What are you doing here brother-in-law?”

“Kaya.” At Zeno’s command, Kaya dove into Yona’s dream, to keep her asleep no matter what happened.

Zeno carefully edged to the sliding doors. While he longed to peek out, the first rule of spying was that if you can see them, they can see you.

Shuten and Guen split up, taking up position by something they could easily knock over to create enough noise to draw attention, while Abi kept careful watch of the encounter between Cheonsa and Yuhon.

“There’s been a report of a suspicious person near here.” Yuhon bluffed.

“There’s absolutely no one here who shouldn’t be, and one report would not be enough to justify a naked sword. Try again.” Cheonsa countered coolly. “Is your displeasure such that you would defy His Late Majesty’s final command, to keep my husband and his family safe?”

“He was the one foolish enough to listen to those who opposed my policies, and base the succession on hair color. The sovereign is the supreme power, but it means nothing when that power is swayed by serpents.” Yuhon protested heatedly. “Besides, the gods have long abandoned us. The only power left is that of men.”

“Killing my daughter will not bring my sister back.” She reminded him. “You cannot denounce the gods based on their failure to save one person.”

The dragons shared confused looks.

“The priest swore even as I ran him through that the prayer had been answered! What other explanation would there be, if it’s not fakery!”

“Did it never occur to you, that maybe the answer was ‘no’?” Her eyes hardened into steel. “You have a wife devoted to you and a son who idolizes you. Is that not enough? Or does my sister’s
memory maintain such a hold that you would toss away the present?"

Reaching into her sash, Cheonsa unsheathed the dagger concealed within. “If you want to kill
Yona…you have to go through me.”

The three dragon spirits traded looks. “Now?” Shuten demanded.

“No. We can’t risk alerting anyone until he’s distracted enough to pay the noise little enough mind.”
Guen pointed out.

Zeno cursed under his breath as he scanned the room and concluded there was nothing he could hurt
himself with enough to generate the scales.

Without the scales, his only option was to aim for the vitals and hope he succeeded before Yuhon
struck him down. This deep in Hiryuu Castle, the dragons’ blessing was at its strongest, yet he didn’t
know what that meant when it came to his scales appearing.

Yuhon scoffed. “Can you even claim that is your child in there, let alone my brother’s? If the priest
was right, then your child never existed. If he was wrong, then bare minimum it’s not Il’s, meaning
the throne cannot pass to it.”

“Keep calling her an ‘it’ and I will cut your manhood off.” Cheonsa stated. “What matters is not who
Yona’s soul had been, but who she is now. For someone so adamant about the gods abandoning us,
you seem to believe Yona is Hiryuu-ou reborn more easily than your father.”

“Like humans have ever been more than the toy soldiers of so-called gods.” Yuhon pointed his
sword at Cheonsa. “Move.”

“Never.”

“Then I will make you move.”

Darting forward, Cheonsa scored a slash across Yuhon’s chest. Shifting the dagger in her hand, she
tried to stab into his side, but it glanced off his ribs as he ran her through.

Guen and Shuten shoved their vases to the ground as Cheonsa somehow managed to bury her
dagger into the meat of his calf. The attention of the nearby guards drawn, Yuhon ran, shouting of an
intruder and directing them away from the corridor to Yona’s room.

Tightening her sash as much as she could in a futile attempt to stem the blood, Cheonsa began
dragging herself the short distance to Yona’s doors. The distance seemed to multiply as she could
feel her life ebb away with each beat of her heart.

She fumbled on the bottoms of the doors and Zeno opened them enough for Yona’s sleeping form to
be visible.

Cheonsa’s hand fisted in his tunic. “Please…keep her safe. Not for who she was, but who she is, and
who she will be…” She pleaded.

“I already am.” Zeno whispered, taking her hand into both of his. “As long as I, Ouruuu Zeno, is her
shield…she will never be injured… I swear on the bond that renewed when we first met in this new
life of hers.”

“Thank you…” Tears blurred her daughter’s sleeping form, the light from the corridor highlighting
her hair. “I’m so sorry…I have to leave so soon…my little dove…”
Her eyes drifted shut, and she was dimly aware of Zeno retreating to the hidden passage as guards and her husband found her.

The pain faded, and she was vaguely aware of being picked up. Opening her eyes, she saw whom she first took to be Yona, but when she blinked, the person was a boy her daughter’s age and with her coloring. A second blink, and the boy was now the man she had seen the night Yona was conceived. “Hiryuu…sama…”

His eyes and face were wet as he cried. “Thank you.” He whispered.

“For what…?” She was compelled to ask as her eyes became too heavy to keep open.

“For being my mother again.”

In the real world, Il clutched Cheonsa to his chest and sobbed. Yona slept on in Kaya’s dream, and would awaken to find her world shattered.

Cheonsa, Queen Consort of King Il, died twenty seven days after they were crowned together. She was twenty-six years old, and survived by her husband and by her daughter, Crown Princess Yona.

“You think we should say anything?” Guen asked several weeks later, when it became clear to all of them that Yona was developing a crush on Su-won. “About her crush?”

“She’s only six; she might grow out of it.” Abi pointed out. “And can we really try explaining why having a crush on her cousin is a bad idea?”

“No we can’t. She doesn’t need to hear that her mother was killed protecting her. Not to mention the secrecy of the promise between Xing and Kouka.” Shuten agreed.

Zeno sighed. “We can only watch and wait. No wonder the miss couldn’t go to sleep without Cheonsa-sama holding her hand this year. She saw it in her dreams, what would happen.”

“It doesn’t help that Hiryuu-sama lost his mother at about this age too.” Guen commented.

“Huh?” Abi asked. “Wasn’t he an adult when he descended?”

Guen shook his head. “No. He took the form of an infant, so any ignorance regarding humans could be overlooked.”

“Never knew that. How come you know?” Shuten questioned.

“The people who adopted Hiryuu-sama as their son were a minor king and queen. My ma had been the daughter of the queen’s nurse, so when she brought home a baby she found by the side of the road, Ma was the first choice to be wet nurse.” Guen explained. “Technically speaking, he was my foster brother.”

“No wonder you two were so close.” Zeno commented. “So Hiryuu-sama lost his adoptive mother around this age too?”

“Yeah. It might have been a similar circumstance too. I don’t really remember now. I just remember
it had been violent. Hiryuu-sama’s father, the king, had already promised not to take a second wife or concubine during the queen’s lifetime, since she couldn’t carry to term, but after she died, he never even gave a woman a second glance. The surrounding domains thought he was an idiot to not even try for a spare. ’course, they thought he was an idiot already for trying to find a peaceful solution to everything.” Guen elaborated.

“So, her nightmare of Cheonsa-sama dying could have been either a premonition OR a memory.” Kaya clarified. “We don’t really know just how much Yona remembers. Just that she sees Hiryuu-sama as someone separate from herself.”

“Zeno doesn’t think we can ask her either. It seems like the miss can get mixed up about what’s her and what’s Hiryuu-sama.” Zeno said with a sigh.

“It would be so simple if she just had a crush on Hak.” Shuten complained.

“Just because Ha-kun-sama found her way to Hiryuu-sama’s side again doesn’t mean Yona has to fall in love with Hak.” Abi reminded him. “Hak seems more like a bratty sibling.”

“Yeah…” Guen sighed as they watched the children on the steps.

“I wish the three of us could have stayed in bed with a cold forever.” Su-won said wistfully.

“We don’t need a cold for that. It’s easy to stay together forever.” Hak pointed out.

“You’re right…”

Unnoticed by the two boys, Yona looked with ancient eyes to the sky above. If only those three were here with us…and if only Zeno could be at my side openly… “You’ll both be back tomorrow, right? And every tomorrow after that one?” She asked, smiling with closed eyes as she grabbed their hands.

“Always.”

Hiryuu gnawed on the pendant that had descended with him. When he had chosen to become a human infant, he didn’t realize just how completely dependent on older humans they were. He couldn’t decide if the lack of control over his movement or the aching gums was worse.

The sounds of an ox cart drew his attention to the road next to where he lay in the reeds. Trying and failing to clearly make out the cart and the humans around it, he decided that blurry vision was the worst.

He jumped as a male picked him and carried him over to the cart. “It’s an infant Your Highness.”

The face of an older female filled his view, close enough that he could see her face clearly. Her black hair was threaded with lines of silver, and she wore a gentle smile easily. “Hello there little one.”

He blinked. He wasn’t expected to answer, was he?

“I’m surprised you spotted him my Lady.” A younger female commented. “But where is he from, to have hair of that color?”

Hiryuu had wanted to have darker hair that would more readily blend in with the other humans, but the only way his brothers would let him go alone was if he kept the crimson of his scales as the color of his hair.

“…it seems my prayer was answered, if not quite as I had hoped.” The female holding her
whispered.

*No, that’s not right. Yona realized. This was when dragon-me became him-me. It’s not me-me past-mother is holding.*

Jaeha found himself in the crow’s nest, the ship an impossible island of calm despite the typhoon around it. “I’m sorry you can’t take me flying.” The crimson-haired girl sitting in his lap apologized. “But Mother is gone again, and it’s hard to tell me from him, when we’re both mourning.”

“You won’t be mourning forever.” Jaeha pointed out.

He’d never known his mother or his father. Custom meant he was chained in his predecessor’s hut once it was confirmed he was the next Ryokuryuu. There must have been a woman who fed him until he was big enough for real food, but whomever that was, and if it had been his mother, he’d never know.

One broken arm for asking the question had been enough.

“I know…” She agreed. “The hard part is trying to be cheerful for Father. Especially since I can’t shake the feeling Mother is dead because of me.”

“I don’t really know anything about mothers, but I doubt yours’ would want you blaming yourself.”

She made a face. “I got it mixed up. Not because of me, but him-me. Sometimes, when I wake up…I think I’m in a pool of blood, then I realize that it’s just my hair.” She tugged on a lock.

“The color seems more like crimson lacquer or a ruby to me.” Jaeha said. “I guess it’s an easy thing to mistake, when you’re still half-asleep.”

“Him-me hadn’t wanted crimson hair either, but his dragon brothers would only let him become human if they could easily spot him, and keeping the color of his scales as the color of his hair was the condition.” She explained. “But…I think I’m starting to hate this color.”

“Not like having green hair is any better.” He said. “I get less strange looks since I started wearing styles from Kai. It makes it a foreigner thing, and it’s easier to deal with people treating me like a foreigner even in a port town like Awa instead of people treating me like something strange.”

It wasn’t quite true. While the only other (live) person he’d seen with green hair was Garou, his hair color didn’t mean anything outside Ryokuryuu village.

“The color is a mark of the dragon, like your leg. Oracles tend to be some shade of blond as a mark of the gods.” She commented.

The typhoon around the ship appeared to have lessened, and Jaeha could make out a dragon weaving among the clouds in the lightning flashes. “He’s keeping you safe. Even though he represents everything you hate.” The girl answered his unspoken question.

“…I’m not sure that I hate him, specifically.” He admitted. “I think I hate the first guy more.”

She leaned her head back to look him in the eye. In her eyes, he saw something impossibly old and impossibly pained. “The fate that befell you and your predecessors is one he curses with bitter irony.”
The boy called Seiryuu found himself in a very uncomfortable situation, with his crimson-haired dream friend crying in his lap. “…I’m sorry.” She said when she finally pulled away, rubbing her eyes with her fists. “Today was Mother’s birthday, and I was so busy trying to smile for Father that I couldn’t fake it anymore.”

“I don’t mind…” He said, looking away with a blush.

As uncomfortable as it had been to have to handle a crying person alone, it felt nice, knowing someone felt safe enough with him to cry. The children in the village always hid from him if he came across them crying. He thought one of them had said it was so they wouldn’t be cursed, but he wasn’t sure.

Flopping back to lay with spread limbs on the ground, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “You always make me feel calm. Like how him-me always felt calm with Abi.”

He tilted his head, before mimicking her. “…It was the first time he could recall looking up at the sky around the moon. Ao hadn’t cared for anything that reminded him of his fading sight, and the sky always seemed misty in the mountains where he now lived.

He still wasn’t sure why the villagers hadn’t left him behind with the dead soldiers that day. With how scared they were of him, he guessed that they hadn’t dared to leave even a hint of the curse that had afflicted them for generations before him and generations after him for outsiders to find.

Sensing his thoughts, she grabbed his hand. “You’re not a curse. But you won’t believe me until I say it for real.”

Kija sat braced against the ever-present Hakuryuu-kami. The dragon hadn’t spoken after the first dream. “There’s no one to call me by name anymore.” He told the crimson-haired girl, who lay with her head pillowed in his lap. “Mother went to Father. Or where Father was supposed to go. Sometimes it feels like he’s still with me.”

“Of the past Hakuryuu, expect for the first few, cling to you. The longing building up over generations.” She answered. “Won’t your wife call you by name one day?”

“I don’t know.” He answered. “I can’t recall Mother referring to Father by his name. And I’m not sure if I want a wife. The girls just seem to stare and giggle at me. I know I have to be married someday. But I don’t want a girl who’s going to fawn over me.”

“I wanna marry Su-won one day.” She declared. “And Hak will be the Wind General, and he can protect us forever and ever. Because if I marry Su-won, I won’t have to choose between him and Hak, cuz Su-won would leave Hak and me if we got married.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“I’m selfish and stubborn. I want to keep Hak with me, as much because he’s Ha-kun as because of who he is now. But I like Su-won too, and if I marry Hak, I can’t order Su-won to stay with us the way I could Hak if he was the Wind General. Dunno how to get Hak to be the Wind General though. He’s always beating everyone in training, but he just wants an easy life with three meals a day and a nap.” She said this last bit as a complaint.

“That’s rather…” Kija wasn’t sure what to refer to it as.

“He might have a sense of how much of a pain it was being a leader from when he was Ha-kun.” She elaborated. “It’s not like I can ask him. He doesn’t actively remember being Ha-kun the way I
can with him-me. But sometimes, it’s more like him-me is still kinda alive, and I have to stop or everything starts mixing up.”

“What do you mean? You’re him, aren’t you?” It was never voiced who ‘him-me’ was, and when he was awake, the details of whatever they talked about were fuzzy.

“I WAS him. My life as Yona has already been different from his life. And—“ She seemed to stare at something he couldn’t see. “I want who I was in my past life to be the least important thing about me.”

Yona laid curled up with Zeno in his room. Su-won was back at his own home since Aunt Yon-hi was in a good spell, so she was strong enough to do things with him. Hak was back ‘home’ too, beating up men twice his size. Father was really busy, and beyond remembering her lessons, Yona was free to wander and do whatever she pleased.

Inside the castle at least.

It seemed like everyone was more bothered by her kidnapping than she was. Yona had had complete confidence in being rescued, either by Su-won and Hak, or by Zeno.

But either way, the guards were keeping a more vigilant on the exits, and given the panic from the sun inside over it, she decided to wait a few months before begging him to help her sneak out through the hidden passages that she knew existed leading out of the walls.

“The miss will want Zeno’s help sneaking out one day, right?” Zeno said as he stroked her hair. She pouted. “I can’t try and beg you if you already know.” She complained.

“Because Zeno knows you would sneak out with the servants when they handed out the leftover food in the city.” He reminded her. “But they’re too scared of something happening again that they won’t let you go anymore.”

“We were stupid about it.” She admitted. “At least with me; I need to remember to keep my hair covered. That’s what caught their attention.”

“True.” Zeno agreed. “At least to distract from the color.”

“…I didn’t think you’d go along with it.” She said. “I remember how panicked you were.”

“Zeno needs to remember that the miss can feel him the way he feels the miss.” He commented. “But Zeno also remembers the faith the miss had, and he knows she doesn’t need to be cooped up forever.”

“…someday, I want to you start traveling around Kouka, to see just what’s happening and come back and tell me.” She said. “Not now, but when I’m older. I pretend to believe Father when he says everything is fine, but if I know at least part of what’s happening in Kouka, I can start thinking of ways to help. I can’t—I can’t pretend to be blind.”

“Like with the food?” Zeno asked gently.

She just nodded against his chest. “Even if it’s only one person…if at least one less person goes to bed hungry…it’s still a victory, right?”

“Of course.”
The conversation lapsed then. Sometimes, in quiet moments like this, Yona felt the burden of apologizing for what him-her hadn’t done, but she wasn’t brave enough yet.

Her sun was alone in her heart, and she didn’t want to dim it.

Not until the others were there to join his brightness.

Chapter End Notes

Guess Kaya and me are the only ones who find serious!blunt!Zeno sexy.

Kinda goofed making Shuten learning to read when he was writing in the omake, but eh, whatever.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The older Hak got, the less he enjoyed visiting the castle. Mostly because of one, crimson-haired reason.

Yona.

It wasn’t like he hated her, really. She had been one of his closest friends when they were both kids. She was just so…contradictory.

She fussed over her hair far too much, and seemed to think about nothing beyond dance, poetry, and fashion.

Her dedication to dance was something he could admire; he didn’t pretend to know anything about it, but being named a dance master before you’re an adult had to be impressive.

But…

She never fussed over her hair when her father was absent.

Those poetry books she seemed intent on memorizing more often than not hid a book on a more weighty subject, like battle tactics, economics, or international politics.

The fashions she favored (as far as he understood the subject) leaned more towards simple, understated elegance than gaudiness like so many at court preferred.

She cared about the little people in the castle, knowing the names of every servant in the castle, as well most of their families, who just married, who had a baby, etc.

And that damn ancient look she got in her eyes sometimes. Like when she watched him and Su-won train together, or when those spirits of hers that he called the Three Monkeys started fighting over something petty.

It all started when Gramps had dragged him along for another general’s meeting. He wasn’t very subtle in how he wanted Hak to succeed him as general. But Hak hated dealing with all the pettiness at court.

Even more so when Yona was added to the mix, using him as a shield to hide from someone.

“Wait, he’s been coming onto you?” He asked to clarify, after the second son of the Fire General, Kan Tae-Jun, had left the area in search of Yona.

She nodded.

He couldn’t help it, and burst out laughing.

“Hak stop thinking like a bratty sibling and think like a general!” She scolded.

Somehow he contained his laughter. “Whomever my husband is will be the next king.” She stated. “Father has never remarried, so it’s doubtful he will change his mind, even to try for a male heir. And
it’s not like I’m expected to inherit myself.” She said this last part almost at a whisper.

“So he’s trying to woo you to be king?” He asked. “Can’t you just tell him you only have eyes for Su-won-sama?”

Her face flushed to match her hair. “Well…it’s not like Su-won knows…and I don’t want him to hear from someone else…”

“What do the monkeys suggest?” He asked. “Wait a sec, where ARE the monkeys?”

“Checking on their descendants. Shuten’s jealous that his is a pirate. But their only useful contribution was to suggest hitting him in the groin.” Her fingers found a lock of hair to fiddle with. “But I can’t really get away with doing something like that.”

“Then why bother me? Just deal with him.” Hak questioned grumpily, starting to walk away.

“Su-won’d be nicer about it.” She muttered.

“Then get him to protect you!” He growled back, refusing to look back and get caught up in it.

Her turning up with fruits later, as a bribe to stay friends, was a little surprising. “I know I’m acting spinelessly, aren’t I?” She said. “I’m the Crown Princess of Kouka, and I need to act like it.”

Taking part in the ‘bribe’, Hak couldn’t help cursing troublesome females.

He had every intention of staying out of it, witnessing Yona flat out refuse the Fire General’s son.

Even though he grabbed her, and was saying creepy stuff about how her trying to fight him made her cuter.

Ah, damnit.

“What makes you think you can get away with touching MY princess?” He found himself saying after pulling Yona out of Kan Tae-Jun’s arms and into his.

“We promised ourselves to each other when we were children. Hime-sama,” He directed to her, pulling her a little closer. “No need to be shy.”

He really, really hoped she’d go along with it.

“But I told you…not in front of other people…” She chided, relaxing into him in a way that he hadn’t thought she would.

It was a more believable performance than he expected.

“You can’t possibly have feelings for him, Your Highness.” Tae-Jun nearly stuttered out.

“In fact, I do.” Yona said simply. Hugging Hak’s arm to herself, she continued. “I love him dearly.”

Hak couldn’t help blushing.

“Unacceptable! I am Kan Tae-Jun, second son of General Kan Su-jin of the Fire Tribe! Who might you be?!” Tae-Jun demanded.

“Son Hak, next general of the Wind Tribe.” Hak answered, somehow managing not to smirk.
Rank-wise, that put him above Tae-Jun, even if he typically didn’t care about that. “His Majesty *personally* chose me to serve as Princess Yona’s bodyguard. Is that a problem?”

Angry, Tae-Jun started drawing his sword, only for the hand of someone completely unexpected to stop his blade.

King Il.

“You mustn’t draw your blade.” The king said mildly.

Tae-Jun barely managed an apology as he turned tail and ran.

“I see you’ve come around to being Yona’s bodyguard.” He commented. “I will be counting on you.”

“My services aren’t cheap. Three meals a day and a nap.” Hak answered, kneeling to swear the oath.

Being bodyguard meant his rooms were now right next to Yona’s. Which meant, about a week after becoming her guard, Hak walked into her rooms after lunchtime to find her halfway into a secret passage, dressed in a simple dress and cloak. “One, where are you going and two, did you really think you could get away with it?” Hak said flatly.

“Ha, pay up Shuten!” Guen cackled. “Told you it’d only be a week!”

Shuten opted to grab Guen’s tunic and toss him into the garden.

“I’m sneaking out.” Yona said the obvious. “And I’ve already been getting away with it for a while now.”

“All I have to do is tell the king or Su-won-sama.” Hak reminded her. “Then it will be over.”

“You’re not going to stop me,” Yona said with that damnable ancient look in her eyes. “Because you’re too excited and too curious to see me doing something like this to want that ended.”

Hak slapped his hand over his eyes with a groan. “Why do you have to be right, damnit?”

The ancient look fled her eyes, and she was back to being a thirteen year old girl who completely drove him crazy. “Go get a plain cloak.” She ordered. “And only take a short sword.”

Hak couldn’t help but be amazed at the secret passage network. “These aren’t on any of the plans.” He remarked. “Not sure how these were missed.”

“All the current plans were based on ones created long after the castle was complete. All the pre-construction plans are long gone.” Yona commented. “The kitchens and clothing workshop are in the network, but the rest of the outbuildings aren’t, being built long after the castle originally was. The point of them is to provide an escape route for the royal family and a way of getting back in if the castle was taken.”

“It’s clear.” Abi said as they reached the exit into the city.

He had his suspicions on who the monkeys were, but the thought of them being three of the four mythical Dragon Warriors was completely unbelievable…right?
“Lina! Been a while!” An older man leaning on a cane greeted Yona. “Brought a friend today?”

“Yeah. He’s not convinced I can take care of myself.” She dug through the basket he hadn’t noticed she had with her until now. “Here. Meat buns!” She held out the small bundle.

“Mmmm… still warm too. Man, the food you bring is better than what they hand out from the castle! Prolly because it’s still warm, and right from the hands of a pretty girl.”

“Seito you know better than to say stuff like that. Ju-mei will whip your butt.” She scolded. “Before I forget…” She pulled out a small bundle of tea. “The doctor said this should help her pain enough to sleep at night.”

“Thank you kindly, Lina-sama,” Seito took the tea with a wink and limped off.

“…he totally knows who you are…” Hak deadpanned. “Aren’t you worried even a little?”

“Nope.” She said. “Everyone knows Mistress Sayuri would cut off anyone who gave me up. In this section of town anyway.”

‘This section’ was wedged between the castle and the red light quarter, and more run-down then Hak would have expected this close to the castle. The residents kept everything tidy, however, and everyone greeted Yona as they walked, passing out the small packets of meat buns and medicinal teas. “Most of them are too old or too ill for steady work.” She started explaining. “They take what small jobs they can, but every extra bit helps. Mistress Sayuri does her best to make sure everyone gets at least some food at least every day.”

“Wait. When you say ‘Mistress Sayuri’ you don’t mean the highest-ranked courtesan in the city, do you?” Word was it cost a small fortune even for a general to spend five minutes with her.

“Is there any other Sayuri in the city?” Yona asked. “Everyone in this area has some connection to a person in the red light quarter. I have tea with her sometimes, and she gives me tips on getting information from a person without them realizing. Although half the battle is won just by being female; most men don’t expect women to understand much of anything.”

“I don’t. I know you’ve been hiding books on politics inside those poetry books of yours.” Hak said.

“Father wants to keep me wrapped up in silk, but I know he lies to me about the way things are in the kingdom, or tells me I don’t need to worry about it. But even though I’m not expected to rule in my own right, I will still be Queen, and I have no excuse to not even attempt to learn anything.” She said.

Perking up, she ran over to a boy who looked to be his age, with blond hair and a dirty travel cloak. “You’re back!” She cried as she hugged him.

“Does the Miss expect otherwise? Ze-I see the mister caught on to you sneaking out.” The boy answered, hugging back.

“You’re back from Water, right? I know you said there was a drug from Kai coming in through Earth…” Yona started.

“It looks like most of the drug is ending up in Water. There’s whispers of drug addicts being kidnapped, but most are convinced that they’re just dying off and no one’s found the bodies yet.” The blond said. “In Earth the pirates in Awa have been slowing down the drug trade, but they’re hampered by lack of manpower. Couldn’t get very close, or a certain someone might have noticed me, for all that my presence was concealed.”
“There’s still not enough evidence for someone to complain?”

“Most of the officials have been bribed, either with money or women. The few honest ones have been scared into silence, mostly due to threats to their wives and daughters.” The blond told her with a frown.

“Still no word on something that could help the drought in Fire, either?” Yona asked, downcast.

“Even if there was, all the available resources and men are being commandeered into the Fire Tribe’s military.” Hak commented. “A few people have crossed into Wind, but between the lack of food and the bandits most don’t make it.”

“Truth be told, outside Saika, Fire is controlled by bandits.” The blond added.

“Even if Father was inclined to do something, any aid would have to go through Saika, since otherwise he’d be accused of overstepping royal authority. And anything going to Saika would only end up in the hands of the military.” She commented with a sigh.

“I’ll keep looking. I know I heard of a crop that’s supposed to need very little water to grow, but the name’s just not coming to mind.”

“And it doesn’t help you’ve forgotten more than most learn in a lifetime.” She said with a giggle and an ancient, fond look in her eyes.

“True true. The miss should head back before she’s missed.” The blond said. “I’ll be heading into the mountains along the Kai border once I leave, but that won’t be for a while.”

“Just make sure to tell me before you leave.” Yona said as they parted ways and she and Hak started weaving their way back through the streets.

“An informant?” Hak asked.

“Kind of. He’s agreed to travel around Kouka for me, to learn things that might not make official reports.”

“…something about him is familiar.” Hak complained. “I know I’ve seen him before, but I can’t think of when.”

“It’ll come to you once you stop thinking about it too much.” She assured him. “Everything’s okay in Wind?”

“Yeah for the most part. A couple bandit gangs but nothing major. But for some reason, every year Xing dumps several dozen pigs heads on the main road between Kuuto and their capital at the border checkpoint on their side. No clue why. A second water source for Fuuga would be nice, since it’s just the river and Fire can block that to put pressure on us, but all the attempts to dig wells have failed. There’s records of past wells, but the consensus is that the water’s now too deep to reach.” He answered. “I suppose you want be to give reports to you on anything interesting?”

“Of course. I’ve got a man on the ground, so one at the top would be useful. And Abi, Guen, and Shuten already eavesdrop on meetings.” She confirmed. “I’m going to try and start playing hostess during meetings. I’m at about the age to start doing it with Mother gone. Not sure if Father will let me.” She complained with a sigh.

“How come? You’ve never been shy about demanding things.”
“Yes; things. He’s trying to keep me insulated from the serious matters, and I’ve never tried pushing that. Maybe if I put it as needing to learn what a wife would know…” Yona mused as they reached her rooms. “Nah; he doesn’t want me growing up too much either.”

“Clear.” Abi confirmed before she opened the exit.

Guen had Shuten pinned to the floor, in what, to Hak, seemed to be a suggestive position. “Are we interrupting something?” He deadpanned. “I mean, I know not everyone can see you, but shouldn’t you be doing this somewhere more private?”

Yona laughed as she grabbed her regular clothes and entered her changing room, leaving Guen to leap off of Shuten, both stuttering protests.

Guarding Yona would be fun, as long he got to heckle the monkeys every day.

Chapter End Notes

Zeno’s trying not to give the game away, and a guy talking the way he usually does would be something to remember. ‘Sayuri’ is a reference to ‘Memoirs of a Geisha’. Not much longer until we reach the start of the series.
“It is rare for you to visit twice in one month.” Mistress Sayuri commented as she watched fifteen-year old Yona perform the tea ceremony with a critical eye.

Yona waited until she had finished the ceremony, and Mistress Sayuri had given her critique of her technique before answering. “It is personal today, Sayuri-sama. I have no other trusted woman to which I feel comfortable confiding in. This is also the only place where I can be sure the walls lack ears, save for your own.”

“Go on then.”

“…I’ve been dreaming of being intimate with my guard and my cousin, sexually. At the same time. All three of us being intimate together.” She said with a faint blush, tripping over the words and repeating herself.

As a rule, names were never used. Even her alias of ‘Lina’ was seldom voiced.

“Are all three of you close?” Mistress Sayuri asked.

“The two of them are best friends. I know my cousin sees me as a little sister. I am unsure about my guard. He acts like an annoying older brother, but he did pretend to be on intimate terms with me a couple years ago to dissuade someone forceful in their attentions with no prior discussion.” Yona elaborated.

“Are these dreams distressing you? Would you prefer them to not happen?” Mistress Sayuri asked.

She had guided many young women through their discoveries of themselves; what was one more? Despite the peculiarity of the circumstances of their first meeting, she couldn’t help feeling a higher degree of affection than she usually felt to her charges.

“I wake up warm and aching, and satisfaction comes quickly. But…they do not distress me, in that I wish they would stop.” Yona conceded.

“Society, I have found, cares little for anything save appearances. As these dreams are not distressing you, and the young men in question remain unknown factors, you needn’t concern yourself overly with them. Should those dreams become reality, all I can advise is discretion.” Mistress Sayuri informed her.

“…on paper, they are nearly equal options for marriage. Only my cousin’s bloodline places him ahead of my guard. Plus, by marrying my cousin, my guard is more likely to stay, then if positions were reversed.” Yona said, staring into her teacup.

“I cannot claim knowledge on such a condition, especially since being what I am precludes me from it.” Mistress Sayuri said dryly. “All I can do is advise you on the practical matters of martial relations.”

“…is it strange, wanting both?” Yona heard herself asking.

“Lina, given the life I have been in since I was a girl of the same age you were when we met, I am
hardly one to judge. Discretion has been how I have lived my life, and that is all I know for certain.” Mistress Sayuri said with a sigh. “You best rescue your guard before more of my girls mark onto him as a challenge. They are beside themselves with a second visit this month.”

“Unfortunately his condition for permitting me to continue my excursions was for him to escort me.” Yona said. “I know Ouryuu was easier for them to handle, as he knew how to play the game.”

“But less of a challenge.” Mistress Sayuri replied.

Pulling out a slim, wrapped book, she slid it across the table to Yona. “You are at the age where you must begin to prepare yourself for marriage. This will help you prepare for the intimate relations. Consider it an early birthday gift.”

Yona bowed in thanks as she accepted the book. “…I would say ‘see you next month’, but it doesn’t feel right to say it this time.”

“There is the sense of change in the air. There have been whispers, but those who frequent here either know nothing or have been oddly sober. Please stay safe.” Mistress Sayuri said, her voice close to a plea had she been anyone else.

“I will do my best.” Yona promised.

That evening, Yona blushed her way through the volume. “The diagrams were unexpected.” She whispered, face as red as her hair.

“Words can only go so far in explanation.” Abi said.

She had kicked Shuten and Guen out for this, asking Zeno just felt *wrong*, and she didn’t feel comfortable talking with Kaya. That had been the whole point of going to Mistress Sayuri a second time this month.

“…am I selfish, Abi?” Yona asked as she fingered the cover, unmarked save for the characters for ‘Relationships’. “To want Su-won and Hak, and dragons of my own, and yet keep the three of you too? I can’t let the past overwhelm now, but I don’t—I don’t want to act like the past never was.”

As she aged, it had gotten easier to tell where him-her ended and she began. It was still a fine enough line between them for her to remain cautious.

“To be completely unselfish is just asking to be taken advantage of. I suppose the best answer is that it’s not completely selfish, seeking to carry the past with you as you travel towards the future. Everyone carries pieces of the past with them; yours just happen to be larger than the others.” He answered.

“Thank you, Abi. I think…it won’t be long now before I’ll meet them. Only there’s a trail of darkness in the way, and I’m not sure if I’ll make it through.”

“You can only take one day at a time.” He reminded her. “Su-won will be here tomorrow. Maybe turning sixteen will help him realize you’re not the little girl whose hand he held so she’d fall asleep anymore.”

“I doubt it. I better give this to Zeno for safekeeping. I don’t really want to think about what Hak would say if he found it; he knows my poetry book tricks and hiding it is just asking for it to be read.” Yona complained, making a face at the book.
“True enough.”

Greeting Su-won went like every previous time since she had grown aware of the intimate implications of marriage were; frustrating. “I followed the advice of everyone I trusted, but it still didn’t help.” She complained.

“You didn’t ask us.” Guen, Abi, and Shuten chorused.

“Correction: every woman I trusted.”

“Aren’t most of those in the pleasure quarter? Just wasted your money.” Hak added his bit in around a meat bun.

“You’re no help at all!”

“Heavens above, what was I thinking? Never mind how obvious a lie it was!” Yona buried her head in her arms, after having lied to Su-won about discussing marriage with Hak, only for him to believe it. “Too cruel, Su-won.”

“You’re the cruel one, dragging me into it.” Hak complained. “I already got a ‘if you hurt her they’ll never find the body’ talk! Downright freaky how cheerful he stayed through it!”

“Your lie may be true soon.” King Il cut in. “You are of an age to be engaged. I have been planning to discuss it with you soon. Naturally, it will be a suitable match for you.”

“Wouldn’t Su-won—”

“Out of the question.” The fierceness of the king’s objection startled both Hak and Yona. “I have given you everything you have wanted, save for weapons. But Su-won is not someone I can let you have.”

The king’s usually cheerful demeanor was surprisingly serious. “You are the Crown Princess of Kouka. Your husband will be the next ruler.”

It hurt more than she wanted to admit that ruling in her own name was not even an option. She would just exist to legitimize her father’s choice of heir. “Su-won is the son of your brother, my uncle. He’s of the blood royal.”

“That is true. But I am King, and I will chose My successor.”

“Why not Su-won?! He’s smart and kind…you’re too much of a coward to even look at a sword…” She stared blankly at the floor. “You’re King despite that.”

“I am a coward, true enough.” King Il calmly acknowledged. “But traitors killed your mother. It is a risk every royal must face. It is why I never remarried. Would you put your happiness above Su-won’s?”

There’s something more to Father’s objections to Su-won. Yona reflected in a deserted hallway. Su-won is the best candidate for my husband as far as I know. Uncle scared me, true enough, but Su-won’s the day to his night. I know he sees me as a sister…would marrying me really make him so unhappy? I know Father wouldn’t pick someone who would make me unhappy. “Stay focused, Yona.” She muttered, seeing but not observing the rain outside. “Why would Father…”
A dark figure at the corner of the hallway drew her from her thoughts. “Hak is that you?” She asked. “Stop trying to scare me.” She complained.

The dark figure said nothing, just reached for her.

Inexplicably her father’s words of how her mother had been killed by traitors came to her, and she took off running. She crashed through a door, and hands grabbed her. “Let go!” She screamed, trying to keep off a hand from her mouth.

“Yona?”

It was just Su-won. “Su-won, there was—someone chased me!” If it was a guard they’d have said something. If it had been anyone that I’d have recognized they would have said something…

“There’s no one out there.” Yona blinked and found Su-won had placed his over robe on her head, the way he had when they were little, to hide her tears.

“I…I shouldn’t…” She wasn’t sure what she shouldn’t do. Su-won is already of the royal family, he already knows the risks…

“I can walk you to Hak’s room, if you’d prefer being with him right now.” Su-won said as he stood.

“What?”

“He’s your fiancé, isn’t he?” Su-won had his back to her.

“No…no he isn’t.”

“You needn’t hide it. It’s—he’d get angry, if he knew we were alone together.” He sounded unsure of himself.

“Su-won…” She had to let him know, now. This was the only chance she had to tell him. “In reality…for so long, I’ve…” Her face was wet.

Why are things so confusing? Why do these feelings weigh like stones?

“The rain’s easing up.” He was ignoring what she was trying to say. “I’ll walk you back to your room, and have a guard posted or Hak join you.”

“Su-won…I—“ The hand she had been reaching to him with was knocked away. “Huh?”

“I’m sorry, but…it would be best to keep some distance.” She couldn’t recall seeing this uncomfortable before, except when he had to explain to Hak that he was, in fact, a boy. “I…might get the wrong idea. I mean, it sounds as if—like you—“

“What if it’s the idea I want you to get?” She asked. “If it was exactly what you’re thinking it is, would it…be that much of a bother?”

“It makes things awkward.” He turned to face her, yet his eyes avoided her face. “I wouldn’t know what to do, if I suddenly saw you as a woman.”

Her joy at getting him to realize she was a woman hit a roadblock. “How’d you see me before?” She asked with a pout.

Su-won’s face resembled a startled deer’s’. “Ah…like a little sister…?”
“I already knew that!” Yona complained.

“Right.” He was back to avoiding her eyes. “I don’t have a clue what to do in a situation like this.”

“What about those marriage offers?” She had to wonder what he had thought about them.

“I’ve just been getting them. I just can’t picture getting married yet.” He admitted, hiding his face with his hand.

“Su-won.” She started. “Do you think of me as a woman?”

“…for the most part. I can’t hold your hand and sleep next to you anymore. I’d stay awake the whole night, tense.” He conceded.

“ Took you long enough!” She couldn’t help grumbling. “I’ve had that reaction to you since I was six!”

He was shocked to hear that. “Really?! I never—” Snapping his mouth shut, he just blushed harder.

“Either way, just you being aware of how I feel about you…and realizing I’m not a little girl anymore…it’s enough, for now.” She told him, wiping her tears away as he rubbed her head the way he always had.

“I just don’t get it!” Yona complained to Zeno later that night, having snuck out of her room to his.

“As far as I can tell, he’s the best candidate!”

“How about the miss runs through the list again?” He suggested.

“Okay. Earth: he’s only been married a few years, and even if his wife bore a son tomorrow, the age difference rules it out. Water: there’s only a daughter to my knowledge, so that general’s successor will more than likely marry her. Fire: he has two sons, but Father already knows I don’t like the younger, and with how Fire’s military has been building up, it would just be giving him what he wants. Wind.” She blushed. “Hak’s good. A childhood friend, already devoted to my safety, even if it’s by Father’s orders, and one of the strongest fighters in the kingdom. Sky: That general’s never shown any interest in a woman. None of the other nobles or nobles’ sons seem very likely; they’ve scarcely shown much prowess at anything. Su-won edges out Hak due to royal blood, plus getting Hak to accept being a general was a hard enough fight. I can’t imagine him signing up for even more work.”

She eyed Zeno and the spirits, who started sweating under her focus. “…do you know something about why Father is against Su-won? As his successor?”

“NOT IT!!!” Everyone but Shuten yelled, making him curse.

As now the sole focus of attention, he couldn’t help shifting. “It’s something that you really need to hear from him, since there’s no other way you’d know why. He’s never shown an awareness of us, and it would be hard trying to explain that you learned it from spirits that’ve haunted you since you were born.”

“And how likely is it that he’d tell me?”

“…I dunno…” He admitted.

“I suppose I’ll just have to bug Father about it myself soon.” She grumbled, slipping back into the
secret passage to go to bed.

“The big question is just how binding is that promise with Xing is. It’s not in the treaty.” Abi pointed out. “Along with what the consequences would be.”

“That is a huge factor.” Kaya commented. “There may have been conversations where the late King told Il of the consequences that you didn’t overhear. It was chance that you overheard the first one.”

“But Il was ordered by Ju-nam to preserve Kouka. He’s been playing it safe, so even if the consequences were comparatively minor, he might not agree to it anyway.” Guen reminded everyone.

With little else to discuss, Guen, Abi, and Shuten departed Zeno and Kaya for the night. “Zeno’s felt change in the air lately. Not just here, but all over. Something will happen soon.”

“Kaya’s felt it too.” Kaya eyed the book Yona had left in Zeno’s keeping. “So this is supposed to be about relationships?”

“That’s what the miss said. Guess it’s a little too risqué to keep in her room.” He sent her a side-long look. “…wanna read it?”

Kaya just grinned broadly, flushing a little.

The morning of Yona’s sixteenth birthday dawned, and she found herself staring at her wardrobe. The foreboding she had felt for weeks was stronger, and it didn’t feel right, wearing the cream and rose colored dresses today.

An idea forming, she grabbed various separate pieces. Once dressed, she considered her appearance in the mirror. The base dress was forest green, with a faint pattern of dragons woven in. The overdress was sky blue with a white collar, with a yellow sash and a gold sash cord. On a whim, since it was a formal enough occasion to warrant an over robe, she slid on a crimson one, the usual circle patterns of flowers replaced with dragons. It was perhaps gaudier than what she normally wore, but taking in her appearance, dressed as she was…

It felt right.

Entering her sitting room to wait for some light breakfast, a small wrapped package on her table caught her eye. Untying the string, a hair comb and a note fell out.

Miss—

Happy birthday! I hope this helps at least a little with your hair. Barring that, it matches your hair.

Ou & wife

Said comb was a cherry stained red, with the handle carved to resemble a rose. Smiling, she tucked it away in her sash.

“Oh time flies! She’s sixteen already!” King Il exclaimed, close to tears.

“Yona!” Su-won called with a wave.

Running over, she could tell he was fiddling with something in his sleeve. “Hold out your hand?”
A beautiful enameled hairpin entered her hand, a cluster of flowers with a butterfly resting on them. “I thought it would look good in your hair.” He explained with a faint blush and a smile.

“My hair?” Yona couldn’t help her slight grimace. “It’s such a bright red and frizzes with even a hint of rain in the air. It won’t stay in any style for more than a few hours. I’m not sure it would look good.” The problem with acting like she hated her hair was that as time went on, she really did start hating it. It wasn’t as acceptable for a woman to leave her hair down all the time the way him-her could.

Plus, when she woke up from her nightmares, she thought she was lying in a pool of blood.

“I love it. Your hair.” Su-won said as he took a lock and let it slide through his fingers. “It’s such a beautiful red. It looks like the blush of the sky at dawn.”

She blushed at his words and smiled.

Hak had to break up the moment. “His Majesty is looking for you.” He said, utterly unrepentant.

“Did I forget to greet someone…?” She wondered as she went to where she had last seen her father.

King Il was in the corner near where she had seen him last, behind one of several screens used to let people take a breather from other guests. He looked nervous. “Did I miss someone during the greetings?” She asked as she joined him.

Wordlessly, he held out a long-ish, narrow box. “I don’t really want to, but your mother had looked forward to giving it to you and it’s a tradition of her family…” He trailed off as she opened the box.

A dagger rested on the cushion. The wooden handle and sheath gleamed near black, highlighting the five dragons lacquered on the surface. Crimson, white, blue, green, yellow. Withdrawing it an inch, high quality steel showed her reflection. “Thank you.” She whispered, clutching the box to her chest.

“It must have been hard, following Mother’s wishes despite your personal beliefs.”

“In your mother’s maternal line, girls receive a dagger when they turn sixteen. It’s meant to represent the duty of a wife to defend the home, I think. She ordered it crafted after your birth.” He explained.

“…I’m sorry I called you a coward. It takes more courage to stick with your beliefs than letting yourself be swayed by others. I should really know better now, especially after all this time…” Shaking her head slightly, she hugged him. “I love you.” She whispered in his ear.

Her father returned the hug just as tight. “I love you too my child.”

Chapter End Notes

Cue ominous music please.
Chapter 10

King Il stood before the crimson haired man who had haunted his dreams since Yona was conceived. His face was a mixture of pain and sorrow. “I’m going to die.” Il stated. “And my daughter as I know her will die with me.”

The man nodded.

“…may I see the woman she will become?”

He hadn’t expected a response, but suddenly his vision was filled with flashes of Yona After—growing stronger, more sure of herself. The final image, the one that stayed with him, was her aiming an arrow at someone. Her fire blazed brightly, and in that moment it was focused into the arrow.

“She will be magnificent.” Il whispered. “But I can claim no credit for it. I did my best to keep the fire smothered, and the kingdom has had far better days. My legacy is not a positive one.”

“Your ideals will drive her.” The man spoke. “You followed the command of your sovereign and preserved the kingdom. And there are worst legacies to leave than the one you will leave.”

“…why us?” Il felt compelled to ask the question that floated in the back of his mind since the first dream, where he and Cheonsa had learned she would bear Hiryuu-ou’s reincarnation.

“The love the two of you bestowed on a baby of unknown origins and the ideals you lived by helped form the man I became. There was no one else…I could bring myself to acknowledge as my parents.” The man bowed. “Thank you, ChiChi-ue…”

It was with bittersweet sadness that King Il watched his daughter at the celebration of her sixteenth birthday. At times, it almost seemed like there was someone else over her form, but it never lasted. After long internal debate he gave her the dagger her mother commissioned when she was born.

The whole exchange as she received the dagger felt like a goodbye. He wasn’t blind to Su-won’s plans. He loathed weapons, not knowledge.

Watching her rejoin the party, Il saw another crimson-haired youth in her place.

Later, after the party wound down and most everyone was in some state of drunkenness, Il returned to his rooms and waited.

Yuohon had killed Cheonsa, because she would not let him kill Yona.

He had killed Yuohon and hidden the crime, as the punishment for murdering the Queen called for the execution of not only Yuohon, but of Yon-hi and Su-won as well. Yuohon raged, but in the end he had no choice.

“If you’re going to do this, never touch a weapon after this.” Yuohon demanded. “Even if your life is in danger…and when Su-won comes for revenge, you will let him kill you.”

Il entombed his sword with his brother. He never doubted that Su-won would learn the truth no
matter how buried. He was his father’s child through and through.

There was a knock on the door. “Come in Su-won.” King Il of Kouka said as he stood, to face his death on his feet.

“I should go talk with Father.” Yona told Guen, Abu, and Shuten. “This is as best a time I’m going to get to get an answer beyond what he’s told.”

“True.” They agreed as they entered the hallway for the walk to King Il’s rooms.

With each step, her sense of déjà vu and foreboding kept growing. Reaching the door, Yona noticed that it was ajar.

“This is careless.” Yona muttered. “Even with guards around it would be—“

“Except where are the guards?” Guen cut in.

“You’re right…I haven’t seen a soul between here and my rooms…” Yona realized. “Guen, Shuten, get Hak.”

Nodding, they ran off.

“You don’t have to go in, Yona.” Abi pointed out gently.

Her hands shook as she dug her nails into her palms. The déjà vu was smothering her. “I have to.” She whispered, pushing the door open enough to slip in.

She had scarcely gone a few feet into the room when there was a flash of lightning, highlighting two figures, one with his sword in the other.

She barely had time to try and convince herself that she was pulling things from him-her’s memories when King Il’s body hit the floor in front of her. “FATHER!” She screamed, kneeling to cradle his head in her lap.

The rustle of cloth and dripping blood drew her attention to the other figure. “Ah…so you’re still awake…Yona-hime…”

It was Su-won, spattered with her father’s blood with it dripping from his sword.

Her world shattered.

“Su-won—Father’s—get help—“ She barely realized the words coming from her mouth.

She knew exactly what had happened.

What had happened again.

“King Il is beyond help. Because I killed him” Su-won said simply.

“…why? Didn’t you—Father loved you…”

_I loved you._

“I’ve dreamed of this day for so long…” She heard his words, understood them, but her mind refused to connect to the scene before her, as he outlined why he struck down her father. “…once he
took the throne, King II murdered his brother.”

“Impossible-! There was an accident-!”

“That’s only the official story. My father died when yours ran him through!” Su-won’s eyes were dark. “The king who supposedly hated weapons and war…struck his brother down with a weapon. I have avenged my father, and will take the place he was denied…as the ruler of Kouka.”

Why is this happening again? Su-won…how could the hand that gave me this hairpin do this? How could those soft eyes as you said you loved my hair harden like this?

“I had heard you hardly ever visit the king’s rooms. Why are you are here, Yona-hime?”

“…to tell him…that I could never give you up…and to ask why…why he was so opp—“

The doors flung open and slammed the walls. “Preparations are complete, my lord.” The dark figure that had frightened her several days ago declared with a slight bow. “There is only one thing left to do…if the Princess has seen what you have done…silence her.”

Yona bolted, Abi spurring her on.

“We need to get outside the walls!” He shouted. “The others should join us soon with H—“

A whip caught her ankle, tripping her. She hit the ground hard, cushioned somewhat by her layers of silk. “This is for the good of Kouka, Princess.” A soldier said as he raised his sword to deliver her death.

“How?”

They—the soldiers, the dark figure she now recognized as Kei-shuk (Su-won’s advisor), and Su-won himself—all paused at her question. “How is my death, and my father’s murder, for the good of Kouka? What could ever…justify such bloodshed?” Yona felt something flickering inside.

“What could justify’?” Kei-shuk repeated. “You foolish girl! You are so absorbed in your petty amusements that you know nothing of what goes on beyond these walls! Il’s folly as brought this country to its knees!”

“You’re right. I AM ignorant…of far too much.” She agreed, much to their shock.

She fisted her hands in her skirts as she slowly raised her head. “But even I…am not so naïve…as to listen to anyone attempting to paint revenge in shades of justice. It was not Kouka’s name invoked…to explain Father’s murder.”

The flickering inside caught fire. It was a candle in a typhoon, fighting against grief and shock.

But even embers can ignite a forest fire.

Everyone was taken back by the look in her eyes. Was this princess…ever someone who had fire in her eyes?

Abi found a ghost of Hiryuu overlaying her form. Not that he had ever had any doubts, but right now, with Hiryuu’s fire ignited…he knew she was his reincarnation.

“You cannot call this ‘justice’ when there was a bloodless way to the throne. Tell me Su-won, was I ever even a sister to you, or just the daughter of the man you loathed? How many of the moments we shared must I look back on and question? How much was a lie? Answer me! Su-won!” The fire
grew brighter as the strength of her glare increased.

This has all happened before, hasn’t it? Different souls...different reasons...but the same outcome...

The only sound was the rain and the distant rumble of thunder. “…I see…” Yona said.

She really didn’t, not with fire in her veins and ice in his heart.

But at the same time, she did. Shifting her legs, she started rising with far more grace than anyone could recall her displaying, despite ten years of dance training and qualification as a dance master. “Halt!” The soldiers with their weapons at her throat demanded, feeling a shiver of fear.

“STAND DOWN!” They found himself obeying out of reflex, hardly realizing what they had done until they found their weapons lowered.

Had this silly princess…ever been able to command with her voice?

“I will not die an ignorant girl on my knees.” Standing tall, she glared at the assembly in front of her.

Spreading her arms, she spoke again. “What are you waiting for, Su-won? Am I unfit to sully your blade? Or is this the last punishment of an ignorant girl? To die knowing the man she loved…cared so little for her as to deny a final request?”

Frankly, if this had literally been any other moment, Su-won might have been clapping. He had always suspected that fire lurked inside his cousin, and seeing it ignited was more magnificent than he could have guessed.

But this was not that any other moment.

Catching sight of Hak, Abi pulled Yona’s hair in a way that anyone else would mistake for wind, but was in fact the signal of his approach. “NOW!” He yelled as Hak leapt into the fray.

Dropping a hair’s width shy of her guard’s blade, Yona heard more than saw the soldiers surrounding her dropping.

“I had thought to stay out of the way with Su-won-sama here…but all the watch posts are abandoned…and there’s faces I don’t know. So…care to explain what the hell is going on here? Su-won-sama?” Hak demanded of his old friend, placing himself in front of the princess he had sworn to protect.

He knew something was wrong when Guen and Shuten had come for him, saying something was wrong at the king’s chambers…and that Yona was there. He had been baffled when he was held back from leaping in immediately, but seeing his princess with fire in her eyes…it wasn’t the silly face she showed her father and the court, or the ancient, fond look she had when spying on him training or meeting with that blond guy.

The pieces that had been falling in place one by one suddenly slotted together. And Hak couldn’t wait to see the outcome.

“Hak.” Yona felt the fire dampen slightly, feeling safer with Hak before her, and her sun floating out of sight, ready to intervene if necessary.

“Hime-san…I’m sorry that I left you alone tonight.” He knelt down in front of her.
“Hak…who’s side are you on?” Yona had absolutely no doubts of Hak’s loyalty, but…

She hadn’t doubted Su-won either.

“I swore to His Majesty to always protect you. No matter what happens, I am at your disposal.” Hak assured her, the uneasy feeling only growing and growing.

“Father is dead. I…watched Su-won run his sword through his heart…” Fresh tears brewed at the memory.

“Is that right?” Hak found himself commenting, trying to absorb the knowledge.

He launched himself at Su-won, who managed to block his blade. “You murdered him!? Our kind king?” Hak demanded as he engaged Su-won.

Hak had known Su-won was more skilled than he appeared, but he was still faintly surprised at his skill. “It couldn’t have been for power…how could you have turned your blade on a king that loathed weapons?” He raged, anger and grief fueling him.

“Kouka has no need for such a timid king.” Su-won answered.

Having caught the shoulder of Su-won’s sword arm with his blade, the soldiers suddenly remembered they had weapons too, and surrounded Hak and Yona, who had risen to her feet again. “So was everything a lie then, Su-won? The man I thought I could entrust Hime-san to…was he ever real?” It was Hak’s turn to ask this of Su-won.

“The man you thought you knew never was. No matter who it is, I will destroy anyone in my way.” Su-won answered.

An arrow suddenly landed between the soldiers encircling the pair. Taking advantage of their distraction, Hak grabbed Yona by the waist and carried her away.

Hak ran his hand through his hair, Yona asleep leaning against a tree, her face still wet. Thanks to Min-su, they had made it outside the castle walls and into the mountains. The safest place to head to was Fuuga. “What a mess.”

“Bigger than a mess.” Guen said. Abi was keeping watch, while Shuten had returned to the castle to get information.

“Safest bet is to make for Fuuga. Her safety is the top priority.” Hak said, almost unnecessarily.

Conversation lapsed. Hak had never really spent much time with the Three Monkeys without Yona around, and as far as he knew, Yona was about the only point they all had in common.

Shuten dropped into the clearing. “Everything’s bizarrely quiet back in the castle, considering what just happened. Everyone’s either involved and staying out of the way, or drunk on something. Can’t discount the possibility that something was slipped into the drinks or food at the party.”

“This had to have been planned for months. No other way it could have succeeded otherwise.” Abi commented, vaguely distracted.

“…I just don’t get why. I’ve known Su-won since we were four. All of it can’t have been a lie.” Sighing, Hak stared at the forest canopy.

“We’ll wake both of you in a few hours. It’s a hard trek to Fuuga.” Guen proposed.
Hak didn’t respond, but merely shifted into a more comfortable position and closed his eyes.

Jaeha sat, improbably, on a cloud. The crimson-haired girl sat leaning against his back, listening to him play his erhu. “Been a while since you’ve been by. Am I competing with another man?” He asked.

“You know you have to share me with others. Father’s been murdered, like Mother was. And there’s something I need to face.” She answered. “I guess I’m working up the courage to face it.”

“The parallels are too great to be anything other than Fate.” The cloud (!) spoke, and suddenly it wasn’t a cloud anymore, but a green dragon.

“…can I ask why you felt the need to disguise yourself?” Jaeha finally asked.

“You can ask, but that doesn’t mean I will answer.”

“He’s hard to pin down, much like you. I hope you don’t keep us running too long once we come.”

“I make no promises.” Jaeha demurred.

“It’s rude to make a lady wait.” Ryokuryuu-kami said.

“Hush both of you.” The girl said, before vanishing.

The atmosphere was tense without the girl to buffer. The erhu disappearing somewhere, Jaeha leapt off the dragon’s back.

The young man known as Seiryuu lay in the field with the crimson-haired girl, holding hands as they stared up at the sky. “It won’t be too long now.” She told him. “I just need to face something I’ve been avoiding for too long.”

“…really?” He asked, not quite willing to believe it.

“Yes, and then we can do this for real, and we can go and do so many different things that neither of us have gotten to do or see.”

“…come alone?”

“Hak will be with me, and possibly Hakuryuu. Ryokuryuu will be hard to convince, and Ouryuu won’t be with me until he’s sure I’m worthy. But I can’t blame him if he doesn’t.”

She answered. “It’s one thing to shield me from afar, and quite another to be actively shielding me while at my side.”

“Ouryuu cannot stay away forever.” Seiryuu-kami spoke up from somewhere behind them.

The girl didn’t answer as she faded away.

Seiryuu-kami and the young man known as Seiryuu watched the night sky in silence through the dragon’s eyes. The young man had many questions, but he was in no hurry for answers.

Kija stared at the crimson-haired girl standing a few feet away. “One last stop for courage.”
“Courage for what?” He asked.

“I have to face something that I’ve been avoiding my whole life. Well, my whole life as me.”

“You couldn’t have put this off forever.” Hakuryuu-kami said, speaking for the first time since the very first dream.

“I know. I knew I couldn’t have stayed the way I was forever. Doesn’t mean I’m quite ready to face it. But time’s up now. I have to do this or lose myself.”

Turning to face him, the girl’s eyes were ancient, and her expression solemn. “Remember that I want to be your friend more than your master.” She reminded him as she started walking towards him.

She continued past him, and kept walking until a swirl of snow seemed to whisk her away.

“I can’t wait to fulfill all those generations of waiting.” Kija told the dragon.

“Hopefully it will satisfy them, or you will never be able to see them.” Hakuryuu-kami replied.

“They?” He asked, but the dragon had fallen silent again.

Chapter End Notes

ChiChi-ue: very formal and archaic way of saying 'Father' in Japanese. Those of you who have watched Inuyasha subbed will recognize it as the way Sesshoumaru referred to his father. This is also how Yona refers to Il in the original Japanese.
She was some place warm.

Someone was holding her, and there was something around both of them.

Opening her eyes, for a half second she thinks she’s looking at herself, but a thousand tiny little differences asserted themselves, and it was him-her.

Without looking, she knew they were surrounded by dragon-them.

As safe and warm as she felt, she knew she couldn’t stay forever.

“…who are you?” She asked.

Something important was happening here, but she wasn’t sure what.

“I thought you already knew the answer to that.” He questioned back, eyes crinkling in humor.

“I do,” She agreed.

She always had.

“But maybe…maybe I want to hear you say it.” She conceded. “Maybe I *need* to hear you say it.”

“Saying it makes it real.”

“I can’t keep running. I can’t keep mixing us up. I can’t…” She furrowed her brow. “I can’t keep being scared of losing myself. We are stronger than that. I am stronger than that.”

There was a fierce blend of pride and regret. “I never expected this when I decided to be reborn.”

“All any of us can do is adapt.”

“True enough.” He agreed with a laugh.

He said his name and it explained everything and nothing and she was both surprised and unsurprised.

With a flash she realized they were both nude, but it didn’t matter since they were two parts of one being and really, if you’re not comfortable with yourself, you’ll never, ever be comfortable with anything.

“Why now, though?” She had to ask. “Is it because I’m experiencing similar things to you? Or because dragons mature in their sixteenth year? Or something else?”

“I think it’s both of those and the simple fact that you’re ready for your journey to start.” He answered.

“Stop trying to be all wise.” She mock-glared and they laughed, all three of them.

Dragon, male, female.
Hak and the ghosts were getting beyond concerned. While they had thought she was conscious when she had woken up during the mid-day rest and cried, it had been a false alarm.

Her body was awake, but her mind wasn’t.

Hak was uncomfortably reminded of a doll. She moved because he held her hand and pulled her, or one of the monkeys possessed her for a short time and made her walk. She drank when he physically held the canteen to her lips.

Now it was evening, and he was holding a flamed-cooked fish out to her, wondering with the others if one of them would need to possess her and make her eat, when her hand reached out and took the fish.

Blinking, life returned to her eyes. “Ha-k—Hak, what-?” He cut her off as he suddenly hugged her, somehow maintaining her grip on the fish.

Yona hugged him back just as hard. “…how long?”

“It’s hasn’t even been a day, but—“

“ Completely freaky—“

“We weren’t sure—“

“ Thank the heavens—“

Hak, Guen, Shuten, and Abi all started talking at once, and Yona, feeling frantic relief from Zeno among it all, couldn’t help laughing. “I’m sorry, but—“ She cut herself off, trying to stop laughing. “I’m sorry for laughing, after making all of you worry.”

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten in nearly a day. She started eating slowly. “I’m sorry I’ve been a burden to you over the last day Hak.”

“Your survival is the most important thing, so please just use me as your tool to do that.” He said, shifting uncomfortably as he started on his own fish.

“If that’s your way of deflecting, it’s not going to work.” She informed him. “If you don’t pay attention to tools, then you don’t know when they’re about to break.”

Hak’s first instinct was to deny he was deflecting to anything, but his second instinct reminded him that she wouldn’t leave it alone otherwise. “…you’ve spent so long in love with him. Years.”

“But you two were always closer to each other. You two got to fight along each other, and I was stuck on the side envying everything both of you were allowed to do because you were boys.” She pointed out.

The remaining two fish were eaten before he spoke. “It’s just—he was supposed to marry you and become King, and you Queen, and I’d spend the rest of my life keeping Kouka and both of you safe. I’d make sure he got home alive if we entered battle, and you’d fuss over every scratch and—“ He stopped before he continued.

“…I never wanted to choose between both of you. I wanted to keep both of you with me forever. If I married Su-won, I could order you to stay as our personal guard. That was my thought at the beginning.” She admitted, hugging her knees. “I knew that it wasn’t fair to you, and my head
realized life didn’t work like that, but…I wanted to be selfish and love both of you, and have both of you love me back and love each other and it’d be like when we were all stuck in bed with a cold, only better, because it wouldn’t ever end.”

She was blushing as her chain of thought finished. Being a healthy young man, Hak couldn’t help flushing at the images her rambling conjured. He wasn’t exactly a stranger to the kind of encounters that could happen between two men, particularly after a good fight when the rush was still going strong and fighting had to stop anyway. He knew the basics of being with a woman, but Yona was the only woman he could imagine being with.

But all three of them together…

It wasn’t like he had never imagined something along those lines. He just assumed that it was just something only he wanted.

“But he chose revenge instead.” Yona whispered, that damnable ancient look back, only sadder. “He said…he said Father had killed Uncle Yuhon.”

That statement quickly banished any happy thoughts. “What?” His voice sounded strange to him, full of disbelief.

“He said Father had run Uncle Yuhon through…it’s so outrageous, but it doesn’t matter what we think about it. The important thing is that HE believes it to be true. And—” Her voice turned slightly bitter. “—when the soldiers came in, and it was pointed out that I couldn’t be left alive after seeing that, it was more important to run.”

“Had King Il even touched a weapon in his lifetime?” Hak wondered.

“I kind of remember him having a sword on him a few times when I was little, but certainly not since becoming king.” She replied.

For several minutes there was only the crackling of the fire.

“Okay, now that it’s just the two of us, the monkeys, and that guy in the tree fifty feet back—“(Zeno broke into a cold sweat at that, and Kaya giggled) “—I’ve got questions.” Hak declared.

“What kind of questions?”

Standing, Hak walked over to crouch in front of Yona. “Why the hell do you have three of the mythical Dragon Warriors haunting you? Scratch that, HOW do you have them haunting you?”

“…you wouldn’t be asking now if you didn’t already know the answer.” She commented, that damn ancient look in her eyes again.

“I want to hear it from you.”

“Obviously, the birth myth is true when it comes to the stuff with dragons.” Hak snorted. “As for why…they haunt me because of who I was in my past life.”

“Hiryuu-ou.”

Yona just nodded.

“Why come back as a girl though?” He asked, baffled since Yona was as far as one could get from a mythical king.
“He made a promise. That’s why I’m a girl.”

“Ha-kun was important to Hiryuu.” Hak stated.

“Yes.”

“Do I get an answer on who exactly Ha-kun was?” It was something that had bugged Hak the whole time he had known her. Usually she remembered his name, but sometimes, like when he woke her up, she’d call him Ha-kun at first, before correcting herself.

“No, you don’t. The two of us…we’re already different people from who we were in our past lives. I don’t want that to overshadow the people we are now.” She answered. “All my life…if I wasn’t careful I’d lose where I ended and he began. When he decided to reincarnate…he didn’t expect to remain a specter in the back of my mind. I never had to try to remember what he knew, but rather, I had to try to not get caught up in ‘Hiryuu’ to the point that I lost ‘Yona’.”

Her hand found a lock of hair to twirl in her fingers. “I’m not making a whole lot of sense, am I?”

Hak crossed his arms and thought. “If I’m following you right…instead of a clean slate when he reincarnated, he’s still hanging around inside you, to the point that you could lose who you are now?”

She nodded. “At least, before what happened yesterday. It’s like a fire was lit inside, and my blood was boiling. After we had gotten outside the walls, when I fell asleep…now that the fire has been lit, I couldn’t keep running from what I had always known. I had to face it, and affirm who ‘Yona’ is. I think, now that I’ve done that…I don’t have to worry about losing myself if I tried reaching for something I’m not passively remembering from him.”

“…I know identity crises are common, especially for young people, but this is an extreme version of it.” Shuten deadpanned.

“Aren’t there supposed to be four of you?” Hak retorted. “It’s not the mythical Three Dragon Warriors after all.”

“Who do you think is in the tree?” Yona said with a smile. “It’s just not time for him to join me.”

“Hold on, the original Ouryuu is still alive?” Hak had to ask. “How does that even work? At least, I’m guessing it would be the original one, if the other originals couldn’t keep away.”

“It’s not my place to reveal anything but…the dragon gods all changed their chosen warriors. Ouryuu-kami…just changed his warrior more than the others.” She said mournfully.

Wanting to change the gloomy mood, Hak turned back to what she had said about a promise. “So…did he promise his wife while she was giving birth that he’d be a girl in the next life or something?”

Yona gaped at him, and the three spirits started cackling hysterically. “Hold on; I’m right?!?” Hak practically screeched. “I was just trying to distract from the gloomy thoughts! I didn’t expect to be right!!!”

“Yeah; his wife made him watch the whole thing, and threatened to stab him if he passed out. The curses were very inventive. I think I wrote them down, but the paper’s long gone.” Shuten said between pants, struggling to catch his breath.

“You didn’t write them down; you just tried drawing out what they were suggesting. Poorly I might add.” Abi reminded him.
“The whole castle was very, very grateful it was a boy. I don’t think we could have survived a second pregnancy.” Guen admitted, eagle-spread on the ground as he took deep breaths of air.

Yona shook herself to come back to the present. “That…had been a trying couple of days…” She admitted.

“So who was Ha-kun?”

“If you’re trying to catch me off guard, it’s not gonna work.” She said, smirking as Hak cursed. “Where are we going? Where can we go?”

“For now, Fuuga. Reasonably safe, and we’ll have a chance to figure out what to do next.” Hak explained.

“Su-won will probably call a Five General Meeting to be named King.” Abi said.

“Mundok will find it suspicious that he’d be called in your place.” Yona mused. “But Fuuga is vulnerable to pressure from Fire, because of the river. If they’re willing to dam the river to put pressure on Wind, what’s to say that they wouldn’t attack merchants whom you could buy water from?”

“We can’t assume Fire is in league with Su-won just yet.” Guen reminded them. “That said, only Wind would have a reason to vote no, since Mundok is far too old to be fooled by anything.”

“Sooner or later we’ll need to go to the dragon’s villages.” Shuten commented. “Well, Hakuryuu and Seiryuu villages anyway. Ryokuryuu left his village over a decade ago, and frankly, the only reason we’d have to go there is if there’s a new one born.”

“If?”

“Who knows? They might be the last ones. We didn’t have any indication that Hiryuu-sama would be reborn until our successors were born.” Shuten elaborated.

“Before we can think about going after them we’ll need some kind of supplies.” Hak pointed out. “I mean, you guys don’t need anything, but Hime-san and I will.”

“How much farther to Fuuga?” Yona asked. “I know it doesn’t take more than a day by the roads on horse, but this is far off the beaten path.”

“I’d say a day and a half to two days.” Hak answered. “We’ll make better time now that you’re conscious-conscious. But if you want to take a dip, this is the last chance before Fuuga.”

“Are you saying I smell?” Yona asked flatly.

“At times throughout the day you’d be sweating like crazy. Unless you’re not bothered by it…”

“Turn around and don’t look until I’m in the water.” Yona declared as she stood and shed the cloak Min-su had given Hak before he went off to play decoy in their escape.

Su-won found himself in front of Yona’s rooms. Closing the door behind him, he let himself sag against the door.

He fully understood now why it was said that planning is essential while plans themselves are useless.
Arguably the most successful part was keeping everything quiet from the greater castle population that was uninvolved in the conspiracy. He had avenged his father, but personally, he was unsatisfied. His uncle had died with far greater dignity and composure than he expected. And he did not attempt any excuses or apologies.

It didn’t feel like avenging when the target had been waiting for you to kill him.

Of course, thinking about killing his uncle led to the greatest failure of the plan.

Yona

He had never expected that her feelings for him ran deep enough for her to make a rare trip to the king’s rooms. When he had realized that she was in love with him, and had been since childhood, he had figured that it wouldn’t affect the plan.

How wrong he had been.

And then the confrontation after she bolted. He saw fire—actual fire—in her eyes as she rebutted Kei-shuk’s attempts to paint his revenge as justice. That fire only grew brighter when she dared him to kill her himself. In that moment, he felt small, like he was facing some huge and powerful being, wrapped up in the form of a sixteen-year old girl.

(His mind whispered that she seemed like a dragon, but that was impossible. Dragons did not exist, and even if they had, they had long abandoned humanity to its fate.)

Wandering over to the shelves when she kept her poetry books, Su-won picked one up, trying to distract himself from the challenges of the past day.

Opening it, he frowned, and looked at the cover. It clearly titled “Poems of Past Eras”, yet the contents were completely unrelated to poetry. He turned to the first page, and it read “Strategic Advantages and Disadvantages of Kouka”.

Suspicious, he began flipping open the other books on the shelves. Most were, in fact, what the cover said they were, but there were more books with contents different from what the cover said. At the end, in addition to “Strategic Advantages and Disadvantages of Kouka”, there was “International Diplomacy and Politics”, “Law Code of Hiryuu-ou”, “History of Kouka: From Myth to Now”, “Economic Factors”, “How to Keep the Tribes from Killing Each Other”, and “The Art of War”. Each was widely hailed as one of the best books on their subject.

Leafing through these books revealed notes in his cousin’s hand in the margins. Yona had been giving herself the education her father never thought to give her.

He chewed at his lip as he reshelved the books. If (When) she returned, she’d likely find them out of order, but his head was too full to try replacing the books as they had been.

How many of the times that he had spotted her reading poetry had she actually reading books along these lines?

Curiosity aroused, he seated himself at her desk nearby. There were several unlabeled scrolls and books on the top, her brushes and ink stones neatly to one side. Vaguely concerned about invading her privacy, he hesitated. He had already stolen the life of her father and life as she had known it; he really shouldn’t steal any lingering privacy she held here.

But he was too curious about this previously unknown side of her to be fully deterred.
Promising himself that he’d stop if he found something extremely personal (like any written fantasies involving him), he grabbed a scroll at random.

This was in a hand different from hers, and struck him as one that had not written in a long time, at least at the beginning. Examining it, he saw it was a report on the drought in Fire. How many acres were currently barren, the bandit gangs and their territories, location and size of military camps…The military information he had prodded piece by piece from General Kan Sujin, but the rest was a surprise. And the date was only a few months ago. At the end, there was a suggestion to ask ‘A’ to search the library for anything on drought-resilient crops.

He chose a book next, to be faced with a list entitled “Marriage Prospects”. It started off with the major courtiers (all rejected out of hand) and the non-military nobles and available nobles’ sons (also all rejected out of hand, with a note of ‘they can’t find their way out of an empty hallway with only one exit!’).

The interesting part was with the Five Generals and any sons.

*Earth:* Recently married to Yuno; no children yet, but the existing age difference with any resulting son even if born tomorrow makes it unlikely.

*Water:* Only a daughter; heir will mostly likely be married to her.

*Fire:* Two sons; elder’s marital status unknown, younger interested in me. Fire already feels it should rule, and marriage to me combined with their expanded military would hand Kouka to them on a platter.

*Wind:* Hak is a very strong candidate; skilled and strong fighter; childhood friend; devoted to my safety through oath to Father. However getting him to become a general was challenge enough, doubtful he’d sign up for the work relating to ruling a country. This was followed by a series of very ancient characters that Su-won couldn’t make heads or tails of.

*Sky:* General is unmarried, with no demonstrated or implied interest in women; either married to his duties or prefers the company of men.

*Sky Royal Family:* Su-won: legitimate son of Uncle Yuhon; skilled fighter, intelligent, kind. Many feel Uncle should have inherited instead of Father, and thus marrying Su-won would right the wrong they feel Grandfather committed. However, he sees me as a younger sister, and this is unlikely to change enough for him to present a proposal himself.

-Father is strongly against Su-won as my husband and the next King. He framed it as me being selfish enough to put my happiness over Su-won’s, but the vehemence of his opposition suggests more than that. Su-won is already of royal blood, so he would be aware of the risks that kept Father from remarrying after Mother’s murder. I’m not aware of anything about Su-won’s character or ability that would make him a poor King. Might be related to the reason Uncle Yuhon was passed over and the throne given to Father. Ze, A, Gu, Shu, and Ka all seem to know the reason, but whatever it is, it is one that I can only really learn from Father myself.

Su-won sat back on his heels, stunned. Yona had thought this through. Between her feelings for him and the logic behind why he should be her husband, logic that he couldn’t really rebut, it made perfect sense what had driven her to the king’s rooms. The date on this last note was only a few days ago, meaning that she had been determined for answers.

The main question left was just who were ‘Ze’, ‘A’, ‘Gu’, ‘Shu, and ‘Ka’. It felt like shorthand for names, but he couldn’t be certain. Plus, what that string of ancient characters said.
Preparing some ink, he copied the string of ancient characters on a loose sheet of paper as best he could. Eyeing the original and his copy, he felt satisfied that someone should be able to give him a reasonably accurate translation.

He contemplated the other scrolls and books. “So scrolls would be reports and books her notes…” He mumbled to himself.

But he would be looked for soon; he’d have to come back and look at those later.

Moving to stand, something underneath the desk caught his eye. It was another book, and flipping it open revealed page after page of ancient characters. “Really Yona?” He commented exasperated.

One line of ancient characters he could pass off to someone else. A whole book in Yona’s hand? He’d have to find time to translate it himself. “As long it doesn’t turn out to be fantasies…” He hoped with a blush.

*I never really gave much thought to being with anyone, too focused on the plans. Both for avenging my father and for the kingdom. But maybe a few fantasies wouldn’t hurt, especially since I’ve given up on it ever being real.*

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry Su-won, it's not fantasies. You'll probably regard them as such, but not the kind of fantasies you're worried about.
“Wait, His Majesty really gave you this?!” Hak exclaimed, examining the dagger as Yona rinsed off the sweat from her dive into herself.

“Mother had it made when I was born. He didn’t really want to, but he finally decided to follow what she would have wanted.” She explained, relishing in the cool water. “I never would have thought it had been a day; it felt like no time at all.” Grimacing at her sweat-soaked shift, she grabbed it to at least rinse it with water.

“Going off the design, seems like she knew.” He commented.

“She did, both her and Il. Based on what we overheard, Hiryuu-sama had visited them in dreams before Yona was born.” Abi said.

“Ya sure you wanna keep the hairpin? Considering who gave it to you?” Shuten asked giving the hairpin a disgusted look.

“…I’m not really sure how I feel about him now. I can’t—I can’t just stop loving him Shuten. Regardless of what he’s done…I can’t move on right away. Plus it’s valuable; who knows when we’ll need something equal to its value.” Wrapping up in her cloak, Yona held her shift near the fire, trying to dry it faster.

“…how long have you known?” Hak asked finally.

“I think I’ve always known, and not just because of them. I’ve dreamed of him, of his memories…for as long as I can remember. I knew the three of them, and Ouryuu, as well as I know you, Hak. The person you are now, I mean, not just who you had been. I know things that I’d have no way of knowing if I hadn’t been him. Sometimes…I’d see myself in the dreams and memories as him, and I’d have to remind myself otherwise.” Yona stared at her shift pensively, not really seeing it.

“If you hold it any closer, it’ll catch on fire.” Guen pointed out, the hem dangerously close to the flames.

Jolting, Yona pulled it away in time. “I better get dressed before it gets later and colder.” She gathered up her clothes with the mostly dry shift and ducked into bushes to dress.

“So what exactly happened while you were out? Your eyes were open, but there was no life to them. You walked because I pulled you along, or one of them was able to possess you for a brief time to make you walk. There was one point, after you’d dozed off on a break, where you woke up crying, and we thought you were awake, but it was a false alarm. And sometimes, sweat was just pouring off of you, too much to just be from the physical effort.” Hak asked.

“I think I was inside myself. Inside my soul, since he was there, along with the dragon we had been. I always knew who he was, but I had to acknowledge it directly, and establish who ‘Yona’ is, I think. It’s something I think I’ve always been aware of having to do, but once the fire lit…I couldn’t put it off anymore.” She reemerged, dressed and combing her hair with Zeno’s gift.

“Fire?”
“Hiryuu-kami was—is—unusual. He was born from a river like the other dragons, but from a river of lava. Becoming human couldn’t get rid of that part, it’s too ingrained. But Hiryuu always had it within him as a human, since he descended and wasn’t born. Being reborn meant it wasn’t lit. I was his reincarnation, but without the fire, it didn’t mean much. With the fire inside me lit…I guess the best way to put it is that now I really am his reincarnation, more than I was before.” Yona made a face. “There isn’t a good way to explain it, really. But with the fire lit now, I can form the bonds with their descendants. The legacy has been passed to this generation.”

“So instead of being something minor, it’s now a major thing that you’re his reincarnation.” Hak stated, trying to clarify it.

“That sounds right. The simplest way to put it is that I’m the inheritor of his legacy, just as the dragons alive today are the inheritors of their ancestors’ legacies.” Yona sat down next to Hak and leaned on him.

“The past vow is still in force to some degree, as that’s what drew the three of us and Ouryuu to her to start with.” Abi explained.

Conversation lapsed as Hak ignored what Abi said and wrapped an arm around Yona’s shoulders. “…is this alright?” He asked quietly, vaguely aware of the monkeys setting up a watch.

“I should be asking you that. I can’t ever deny that part of me is drawn to you because of who Ha-kun was to Hiryuu. But what we have now is its own thing. That’s why I won’t tell you who exactly Ha-kun was.” Yona replied, sagging into his strength and comfort.

“If I try guessing, will you at least tell me if I’m right?” Hak was privately thrilled when Yona wrapped her arms around his torso as he settled them against the rock face.

She hummed in agreement, and mumbled something he didn’t quite catch as she drifted off to sleep.

Hak closed his eyes and thought about the little he knew of ‘Ha-kun’. Whomever they were was an important person to Hiryuu. His gut said that Ha-kun had been a lover at least. Given how Yona was a girl in this life despite having been a man previously, he couldn’t discount the possibility that Ha-kun had been female. If Ha-kun had in fact been a she, then it was anywhere on the range from concubine to wife or queen.

His mind conjured up that stone bench in the garden, and toddler Yona’s babbling explanation to him when they met that he hadn’t understood. It must have been a special place for the two of them.

Leaning his cheek on her head, Hak followed Yona into sleep.

The garden was full of mist, and through it was a figure of a small woman about Yona’s size. Drawing closer, Hak saw she was facing away from him. “You’re Ha-kun.”

“Watch out for her, alright? They may be idiots, both of them, but they’re our idiots.” She said, ignoring his implied question and turning to look at him, and it was like standing before a mirror, before all the tiny differences asserted themselves.

“You don’t have to tell me that.” Hak was privately amused, now that he had a clear view of her, that she was the exact same size as Yona.

She scowled, like she knew what he was thinking. “Just hurry up and get back home.” She commanded.
“…am I gonna remember any of this when I wake up?”

“No clue. The only reason you’re even seeing me now is because of our idiot’s fire awoke. Why? I don’t know.” She admitted. “Make sure he pays.”

There was no need to explain who ‘he’ was. Smirking darkly, Hak nodded.

Zeno wasn’t sure quite where he was. Scratch that, he didn’t even remember falling asleep. There was no other way he could be floating in nothing.

He became aware of a presence behind him, and turned towards it. His eyes widened when he saw what it was.

Ouryuu-kami.

The dragon god was translucent, and seemed…diminished, somehow. “My voice has reached you now, it seems. Hiryuu’s fire igniting in this life has helped.”

“Was…” Zeno’s voice cracked. “Was what Kaya told me true? That I’m your other half in truth?”

The dragon nodded. “There needed to be one dragon that carried the knowledge of that time forward. I had planned it all before you were conceived. I just never anticipated how bonding so closely to a human would change me as much as I had changed you.” The dragon bowed low. “I know I have done you a great disservice.”

“…will I ever go above the skies?” Zeno finally asked after several minutes. “Or will I outlive the end of the world?”

“I know one day you will. What I do not know is if that day will come at the end of Hiryuu’s current life. At some point, we will be able to shift between human and dragon, Heaven and Earth.”

Zeno slowly walked up to Ouryuu-kami. “I can’t rage at you for my fate. It would be like raging at myself. Because I’ve always been a part of you, even before I was a Dragon Warrior. You sent a piece of yourself to be born human. That’s why you picked me, even though I wasn’t a warrior or any kind of fighter.”

“Yes.”

Zeno reached his hand out and rested it on the dragon’s snout. “Tell me about us? What this body of ours is fully capable of?”

There was a sense of a smile and relief, as Zeno leaned forward to rest his head against Ouryuu-kami.

Dawn was just touching the sky when Zeno opened his eyes. Kaya, dozing on his shoulder, started a bit when she realized he was awake. “Zeno feels different now to Kaya. Ouryuu-kami?”

“Yeah…one day Zeno will be able to go above the skies with you.” He answered, reaching to wrap an arm around her shoulders without thinking about it.

They were both shocked when his arm didn’t pass through her. “We can touch? Outside the dreams?” She asked, startled.

“Guess so.” An idea came to him, and he leaned in to kiss her.
There was a coolness, but he could feel her lips on his. “Zeno’s not sure what’s happening, but he thinks meeting Ouryuu-kami inside himself is why.” He whispered.

Kaya blushed, even as a naughty smile graced her lips. “Shall we test how far it goes?”

Zeno had absolutely no problems with that.

“Wait, you want me to teach you swords? Wasn’t he already a swordsman?” Hak asked as they trudged through the forest.

Progress was significantly faster now that Yona was conscious, and her dance training helped her maintain her balance over the terrain.

“Hak, I’m a head shorter than he was, at least. Plus I’m built smaller. I could probably pull forms from him, but I’d be remembering how it went in his body, which is no help.” Yona pointed out. “He also didn’t have breasts, making my center of balance different.”

“We’ll start with the bow too. I’ll feel better if you had a long distance weapon, especially since you haven’t had the conditioning. Though all that dancing didn’t hurt.” Hak acquiesced.

“You’d be surprised how physically demanding dance is.” She felt compelled to point out. “You going to place your first guess?”

“…actually, I think I saw Ha-kun last night. I don’t remember all of the dream, but I remember that she was there. And that she’s, well, a she.” Hak admitted. “So, I’m guessing that Ha-kun was at least Hiryuu’s wife. Maybe Queen.”

Yona tripped. Hak managed to catch her in time before she hit the ground. “Based on your reaction, I’d say I’m pretty close.”

“More than close.” She admitted, not meeting his eyes. “Does it bother you? Knowing that?”

“Does it bother you that I know that?” He countered, a gentle hand raising her head so their eyes met.

He wasn’t sure just what kind of look was in her eyes, but it made him tingle. “No. It doesn’t bother me that you know.” She whispered, subtly closer.

“So why should it bother me?” He asked, not aware that their faces were getting closer and closer.

“I dunno.” Their lips were nearly touching now.

There was a sudden blast of cold, and Shuten’s face was suddenly unsettling close. The moment broken, they leapt apart. “If you lovebirds are quite finished…” He grumbled, before leaping off to scout ahead.

“Cockblocker.” Hak muttered to himself, ignoring Yona’s quizzical look. “What crawled up his ass?”

“I think he’s jealous. His favorite courtesan was reborn, so it’s not like he can really go for a booty call.” Guen answered. “And Mistress Sayuri threatened to charge Yona if he kept haunting the red light district.”

“I still say all of you are perverts.” Abi said haughtily. “Plus Ouryuu had been having some fun of his own before dawn, which didn’t help.”
“You’re totally a prude, aren’t you?” Hak commented.

“I lost count of how many couples I observed engaging in relations out in the open the first month after gaining these eyes. I can see coast to coast, and there are plenty of couples who can’t be bothered to wait for a room or tent or anything.” Abi said flatly, stalking after Shuten, his ears flushed pink.

Guen sighed. “Better go with them to make sure they don’t kill each other, despite failing before now.” He waved a hand as he followed Abi. “Just keep the clothes on kids, alright?”

“…I really hate them…” Hak complained, flushed from the implications.

“They can be a bit…much.” Yona conceded, face as red as her hair.

Somehow they reached Fuuga that night, opting to push on in the dark when Shuten assured them that it was close by regular people standards at dusk. Hak sighed in irritation when he saw the guards sleeping leaned on each other. “I’d hit them awake, but I think I wanna freak them out in the morning.” Hak commented, circling wide of the guards as he lead Yona into Fuuga.

The city was quiet as he led the way to the Wind General’s mansion. Passing through the gates of the compound, he saw Tae-yeon sleeping on the veranda. “Oi, Tae-yeon, why are you sleeping out here?” He asked as he gently shook the boy awake. “Sleeping out in the open can irritate your illness.”

The boy groaned as he woke up. “The pretty lady said you’d be home tonight, so I was waiting for you.”

“’Pretty lady’?” He asked confused.

“She looked like you, but see-through.” Tae-yeon elaborated around a yawn. “Sorry if you were trying to surprise me.”

“It’s alright. But next time wait for me inside, okay?” Passing his weapon to Yona (who staggered under the weight until Guen subtly supported her), Hak picked up Tae-yeon, who had already dozed off again.

Thankfully, there was a weapons stand right inside the vestibule. Setting Tae-yeon back in his futon, Hak quietly showed Yona to a room where she could sleep, close to his own. “Good night, Hime-san.” He said on the threshold as he departed.

Yona fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, worn out from her dive into herself and the trek to Fuuga.

Hak gleefully startled Tae-woo and Han-dae awake the next morning. “Oi, the tribe motto is ‘free-spirited’, not lazy!” Shuten grumbled at the pair’s laid-back attitude. “I doubt that’s changed over the years!” He took swipes at them with his spear, giving them chills and freaking them out even more.

Hak entered the room Yona was sleeping in around noon, concerned with how late she was sleeping. She had woken up, and was eating the meal Tae-yeon had brought her. “So are you friends with big brother?” He asked.

“I think so.”
Naturally Tae-woo and Han-dae had to burst in from eavesdropping. “If you’re not friends then what is your relationship with him?!” Tae-woo cried.

Thinking about it, she just blushed. “Hope is restored! There’s a chance for you Hak-sama!” Han-dae cheered, and Hak just slapped a hand over his face.

Somehow Hak was able to get the pair and Tae-yeon to leave. “Gramps was called to a Five-General meeting in my place.” He told her, kneeling beside her futon.

“He’s too experienced to be fooled by any explanation they attempt.” Guen mused. “Unfortunately he’s the only one who could possibly vote ‘no’ or abstain altogether.”

“My claim is too weak to be viable with only the support of one tribe. And that’s without factoring in Fuuga’s weak point. That said, I’m the only blood relative Su-won has left that could inherit the throne. Unless he marries and has a child—any child—I’m his heir.” Yona stated. “The only trouble is I’m not sure how to get the other tribes on my side. Fire is power-hungry, and I have nothing to offer to keep them from turning on me. Earth is fight-happy, and while regaining the territory Father gave away is a goal, it’s not a major one. Water’s a huge question mark. And Sky is probably Su-won’s biggest supporter. Finding the Dragon Warriors will help, but Uncle Yuhon banned the book of the birth myth around the time he expelled the priests, so I don’t know how much help having the Dragon Warriors on my side I can expect, when it comes to getting the tribes to side with me anyway.”

“There has to be an oracle somewhere in the country who could give you some insight into the path you should take; the only trouble is finding them.” Abi said.

There was a mutual sigh at that statement.

Chapter End Notes

Not fully happy with this but don't really know how to improve it.
Chapter 13

Yona dozed off again shortly after their discussion, worrying Hak. “This exhaustion isn’t natural.” He said. “I know the journey here was hard for her but still…”

“It’s not just the physical exhaustion.” Abi pointed out. “She did a soul dive and established who ‘Yona’ is. Close contact to Hiryuu-sama has left her exhausted before. Add in the journey here and witnessing her father’s murder by someone she loves…if she’s still this tired tomorrow then we should worry.”

Hak didn’t have a choice but to go along with their suggestion. “And we’re back to awkward silence.” He muttered, wandering to a secluded section of the manor, a courtyard with a huge tree, with a fork in the middle that formed the perfect seat. Guen had stayed with Yona, Shuten had gone up on the roof, and Abi had followed him out.

“So you’ve figured out who Ha-kun was.” Abi commented, almost unnecessarily.

“Yeah…I know I should be surprised, not just about that but all the stuff with the Dragon Warriors, but I’m not. It explains so many things.” Hak answered, getting settled.

“Do you have any questions?” ‘About Ha-kun’ was Abi’s unspoken question.

“…no. At least nothing I don’t plan on trying to bug out of Hime-san later.” Hak answered.

He thought he was starting to understand more her insistence on not telling him. It was kind of weird to know that he’d been a girl in his previous life. But more than that, she herself had said that what they had now was its own thing, separate from whatever their past lives had together.

“I’ll go and keep an eye on the gates. Are you staying here?” Abi asked, somewhat politely, but he’d always been more polite than the other two anyway.

“Yup. I’ve missed my favorite nap spot. I trust the tribe, and I trust the three of you.” Hak told him. Even before all of these revelations, he knew he could trust her to the three of them. If it was something left from Ha-kun he didn’t know, but that didn’t matter.

Nodding, Abi departed.

Getting more comfortable, Hak’s thoughts turned to what Yona had admitted to after ‘waking up’. Wanting both him AND Su-won. At least, the Su-won they thought he had been.

Frankly he was still stuck on her confession of wanting him, not just because of Ha-kun. She had always seemed so taken up with Su-won.

Then again, it wasn’t Su-won she had trusted to not stop her from sneaking out.

“What a mess.” Hak told the air.

There was still the question of why His Majesty was so adamant that she couldn’t marry Su-won. Practically everyone in the castle had expected Su-won to become Yona’s husband and the next King.

Hak’s eyes turned dark. King Il wasn’t the coward and fool people took him for. For Su-won’s plan to work it had to have been in planning for months if not years. Had the King known of it?
Only trouble was that if he had, he couldn’t see why he’d let Su-won kill him. Stabbing someone in
the heart was not an easy thing to do if they were moving. So King Il had to have been standing still
enough to let someone stab him in the heart.

Either there was some truth in Su-won’s statement of Il murdering his father Yuhon, or Il had
realized there was no reasoning with him. Sighing, he gave up that train of thought.

Feeling as safe as he ever felt, Hak let himself doze off.

He was Ha-kun. I shouldn’t let the past blind me to the present.

Su-won frowned down at his translation. Just who was Ha-kun?

Translating the ancient characters turned out to be relatively easy once he found a series of books
tracking how the characters had changed over time. He was confused as to why Yona felt the need
to write this line as she had, or the reasoning behind the book written entirely in them.

It wasn’t for practice. True there were some ink blots where she’d made some mistake, but on the
whole it had more the appearance of a story then practice of some kind.

He turned to Yona’s book, his own blank one flat on the table near it. He should have time to try and
translate a page or two before he really should go to bed.

Picking up one of the reference books he had found, Su-won began.

He was born from a river like his brothers, but from a river of fire, of lava. Perhaps that was why he
found himself too curious and restless to remain in Heaven.

He was fascinated by humans. Their lives were so short, like clouds, yet they strove to do as much as
they could in that brief time.

He began to plan out how he could go and live among humans like he was one of them. He didn’t
want to just visit and be a silent specter.

He wanted to experience life as humans did.

He could never keep anything from his brothers. ‘If you are going to do this, we must be able to find
you easily.’ His blue brother decreed.

‘Keep your scale color as the color of what humans call ‘hair’.’ His white brother proposed, his
green brother nodding in agreement.

His yellow brother said nothing, but before him formed a golden pendant marked with a dragon.
‘Do as they suggested, and take this with you. Only then will we let you do this alone.’

With his brothers in agreement, he had no chance but to do as they said.

Thus the day came when he decided to do it. After some thought he decided to descend as a human
infant. Not only would it let him experience life more fully as a human, but any ignorance he showed
could be excused, coming from a child.

His yellow brother felt the saddest. ‘It’s not like a human lifetime is that long of a time.’ He tried to
assure his yellow brother, but the sadness remained for reasons he didn’t know.
After the mandatory last-minute fussing over him by his brothers, the Crimson Dragon God closed his eyes and pictured the infant he would become in the human world. About three months old by human reckoning, with hair the color of his scales and eyes that were the color of one of his favorite flowers in the human world, wisteria.

The sensation that came over him as he invoked his power to do this was one that defied comprehension. He was splitting apart, yet becoming whole. The fire that filled his whole being dampened to near nothing, only to flare back up, nowhere near as strong as it had been.

His eyes flew open. He was now the infant he had pictured, wrapped in a blanket by the side of a road, the dragon pendant nestled in the blanket with him.

He could feel his dragon self inside, tending their fire. He was a part of the Crimson Dragon God, yet he was not him.

There was no point in becoming human and experiencing life as they did if he was tempted to cheat. He felt oddly blind, yet at the same time he marveled at the difference between the dragon senses he was used to and these human ones.

He knew humans had names, and that infants were named by their parents, so he guessed that he would be named by whomever found him.

Now for his least favorite thing: waiting. True, a human might measure his patience as long, but to his brothers he was as restless as the fire that had birthed him.

Su-won set down his brush, frowning at his translation. It seemed like the beginning of the birth myth, yet with more…humanizing (?)…detail. Reading it over, he could almost see the events they described.

But why would Yona write something like this? Never mind the question of going to the trouble of using ancient characters.

Extinguishing the lamp on the table, he slid into his futon while his mind continued to whirl.

The image of his cousin daring him to kill her, demanding answers to the lies, appeared when he closed his eyes. There was a man over her form, and a crimson dragon over both of them.

“Fictional gods will not help anyone Su-won.” He reminded himself. “Red hair does not make her him, if he even existed.”

There’s no way any of that could possibly be true…

…right?

His dreams that night were filled with fire.

Thankfully for Hak's nerves, Yona woke at a reasonable hour the next morning. After coming across Tae-yeon and having breakfast with him (nearly dying from the cuteness during it), she started taking in the sights as she walked around Fuuga.

The road plan was still the same as when this had been Ha-kun’s home, but expanded, and shifted closer to the river.
Before she realized it, she had an armful of laundry. “Huh?” Was all she could say as Hak led her to
the river.

Then her brain caught up the laundress’s words. “I’m a dance master and I can play the koto.” She
grumbled.

She wasn’t totally lacking in feminine charm.

“You still can’t sew.” Hak reminded her.

“Blame Father. After Mother died, he went a little overboard with keeping things that could injure
away from me. Right down to the little embroidery scissors and needles.” She admitted. “Not that
Mother had been able to show me a whole lot…”

Arriving at the river, Hak was distracted by the wash bins. “Hak, there’s a problem.”

“You can’t complain about doing laundry, Miss Lady in Waiting.” Hak grumbled, walking over to
her.

“I mean an actual, legitimate problem.” Yona told him, as he saw what she had.

The river was dry.

“So Fire is on Su-won’s side…” She murmured later, sitting in the Tribe library with Mundok and
Hak. “Mundok, you have to vote for him. The city can’t rely on merchants forever, and there’s
nothing to stop bandits, real or disguised Fire troops, from attacking them and ruining any water they
carry.” She implored him.

“And just let him get away with what he’s done?!” Mundok exclaimed, outraged. “Murdering your
father! His crowned sovereign! Denying you your throne!”

“My claim is too weak right now. I have never been expected to rule in my own name.” Yona
reminded him. “The other countries will be watching. Frankly, our internal problems are big enough
without plunging the kingdom into civil war. Drugs in Water, human trafficking and economic
decline in Earth, drought and famine in Fire…At best, anything done in my name would be a minor
nuisance. At worst it would give our neighbors an excuse to attack us. I cannot claim the throne
now.”

She fist ed her hands in her skirts. “I don’t like it any more than you do, Mundok. But I need time to
build up support in the other tribes. As it stands, I am still Su-won’s heir, whether or not I’m
acknowledged as such. If I can get enough support on my side, and can be seen as a viable
replacement…but before I do any of that, and before seeing the kingdom with my own eyes…there’s
something I still need to do.”

“What could you possibly need to do that’s more important than gaining support and stabilizing the
kingdom?” Mundok was baffled as to what it could possibly be.

He swore there was fire in her eyes as she stared into his’, standing in judge as to his worth.
Wordlessly, she pulled out a narrow object covered with cloth from her sash.

Placing it on the floor between them, she slid it towards him.

She continued watching him as he pulled the cloth off. “So he did give it to you after all…” He
whispered, staring at the dagger he had helped Queen Cheonsa commission, arranging for the
Wind’s best metalsmith to craft it himself.

The five dragons, crimson one in particular, also seemed to stand in judgment of him. “…did he tell you the meaning?” He finally asked, meeting her eyes.

“He didn’t need to. There has never been a time in my memory, in this life, where I did not know.” She answered, and this time he knew for certain there was fire in her eyes. “It just means a lot more now than it did before.”

Without consciously thinking of it, Mundok’s eyes flicked over to Hak. “I had my suspicions.” Hak answered the unspoken question. “They have been confirmed.”

Mundok sat back on his heels, sighing deeply. “No matter what your uncle decreed, some things have never been forgotten in Wind.” He admitted. “There is a mostly forgotten myth. The precise details have been lost, but it is said that when Hiryuu-ou defeated the leader of the people who would become the Wind Tribe, eternal fidelity was sworn.” He bowed low to Yona. “Say the word and we will obey. I say this not as the former General of Wind, but as the Elder of Wind.”

Yona returned the bow, abet not as low. “I accept the fidelity of Wind offered by yourself, Elder Mundok.”

“What do you require from Wind, Yona-hime?” He asked, wording it more formally than he would usually.

Yona couldn’t help scowling slightly. “None of that, now that the formality of the pledge is done. I will not have my honorary grandfather standing on unnecessary ceremony.”

“Seriously Gramps, she’s still the same person.” Hak pointed out.

“It’s Grandpa!” Mundok yelled.

“In your dreams, old man.”

She started giggling, distracting Hak and Mundok from beating each other up. “That’s more like it!”

“But seriously, Yona-hime, what can Wind do to aid you?” Mundok asked again.

“Approve Su-won as the next king.” She said. “Put out feelers in the other Tribes, find out how much belief in the birth myth lingers. I don’t want to, but if playing to that belief works, I can’t discount it. Sky and Fire, as they stand currently, could not be dissuaded from Su-won. Water is a strong possibility, for all that they disdain getting involved. Earth will be tricky; fighting isn’t an overwhelming goal of mine, and I think the current General looked up to Uncle Yuhon. Su-won is shrewd enough to be able to gain his support without making it obvious.”

“And if Su-won questions our loyalty?”

“I doubt he would personally, but say that your loyalty is to Kouka.” She proposed. “He’s smart enough to catch the hint.”

“I do have to wonder if this has anything to do with what was said during your divination, during the ceremony where you were officially presented to the Tribes.” Mundok mused.

“My divination?” Yona blinked.

“When a child is born to the royal family, there is a formal ceremony where the newborn is presented
to the Tribes, and acknowledged by them. This is preceded by a divination, but only blood relatives 
and the oracle giving the divination are allowed to be present for that. I don’t know if it would have 
been written down or not.” He explained. “Aside from the oracle, whose survival I am unsure of, the 
only two people still alive who were present are Su-won-sama and yourself. And given his age, I 
doubt he’d remember it.”

“That’s right; a purification was performed beforehand. Not that it could have kicked us out if we 
were determined to stay, but it was still enough to send the message to leave.” Guen said, 
remembering that ceremony.

“How many priests and oracles survived my uncle?” She asked.

“I’m not sure. But I know there is an oracle living in the cliffs on the border between Wind and Fire. 
He may be able to give you insight into what was said.” Mundok answered.

Han-dae threw the doors open. “The merchants were attacked on their way here! Tae-yeon’s 
medicine was in their caravan!”

“Quick, send a rider to the doctor in the woods.” Hak ordered. “Do we have enough supplies to treat 
the merchants?”

“Between us and what was salvaged from the caravan yeah. I’ll go for Tae-yeon’s medicine; I am 
the fastest rider after all.” Han-dae answered, running off to the stables.

Yona found herself helping treat the merchants, the little she could help. Shuffled to the side once the 
little she could do was finished, she wandered to Tae-yeon’s room, joining in the vigil waiting for 
Han-dae.

Mundok had sent a rider to Hiryuu Castle with a letter. While she didn’t know the exact wording, 
she knew he changed his vote.

Once again nearly dying from Tae-yeon’s cuteness, she found herself kneeling on a futon, staring out 
at the moon. “Hak’s going to do something stupid and self-sacrificing, isn’t he?” She asked Shuten.

“Giving up the name ‘Son’ and the general title, and intending to leave you here and take the blame 
for Il’s death? Yep.” He answered. “He’s not leaving until full light, so we’ll wake you with enough 
time to get a few things and say good-bye to Tae-yeon. Abi’s watching Hak, and Guen’s with Tae-
yeon, though I don’t know why.”

Curling up under the quilt, she found herself remembering the girl who nursed alongside him-her. 
She had had a similar ailment. But in that time, all they could do was pray and hope.

Drifting asleep amidst memories of learning about death for the first time, Yona never noticed her 
pillow growing wet beneath her head.
Jaeha could not feel or see the flickering red light anymore.

He told himself that that was a good thing; the light had to have been Hiryuu reborn, and if it was gone, he was home free until the poor bastard who’d take his place was born.

He was absolutely, completely, not worried.

(The lie wasn’t working.)

He sat in an isolated spot in the cove, playing his erhu. Unwillingly, his mind turned to the dreams.

Ever since he’d escaped Ryokuryuu village, he would have periodic dreams of a crimson-haired girl. There was no real rhyme or reason to her appearance, but it seemed to be based on her life.

If she was, in fact, real.

Giving up on his music, he pulled out a small notebook. Without even meaning to, he had kept record of what she said in the dreams. “So in the most recent one, she said her father had been murdered like her mother had been, and she working up the courage to face something…” He read, unconsciously bringing her image to mind.

Short and petite, with the crimson hair marking who she was. In any other circumstance, he’d waste no time offering his help. Maybe his mind had been conjuring up the kind of master he wouldn’t mind serving, in place of the pompous, overbearing bastard he was sure to be, regarding the dragons much as Yan Kum-ji viewed Awa, claiming control over his life and death.

Ouryuu was on the move again. He’d been moving around the country for several years now, always returning to the royal capital after his forays. Sometimes, Jaeha was sure he had felt Ouryuu nearby, as in Awa nearby, but he could never track him once he got within sight of Awa’s walls. During the periods he would lose track of Ouryuu, he would sometimes feel eyes on him, watching and driving him crazy since he could never figure out where the owner of the eyes was hiding. Even if he stubbornly stuck to the ship, the eyes were there.

“Stop thinking about this, Jaeha.” He reminded himself. “As long as the others don’t come to Awa, then you have no reason to think of dragons and Hiryuu and blood curses.”

Tucking the notebook away again, he picked his erhu back up and began playing again.

Some corner of his mind felt like pointing out that he was playing the same song he’d play for the girl in the dreams, but he shoved that part away.

The young man called Seiryuu was keeping watch on the ruins’ edge like always, but his mind was elsewhere. “Ao, she said that it wouldn’t be long now until she came.” He whispered to his only (living) companion. “Then we’ll watch fireflies under the moon together. At least, I hope she’s coming. She might not be real.”

He was quietly terrified that his crimson haired dream friend would stay that, a dream. That there was
no chance of friendship for someone like him, and no other person to come willing near him unless another cursed child was born.

He didn’t know how he felt about it. Every generation, the villagers prayed that their child would not be the cursed one, and every generation, one would have that hope crushed. He hoped, for their sake, that he would be the last.

But at the same time, he selfishly wanted someone to call him by name, even if for only the brief time he would live after the next child was born. “Ao, you’ll watch over the next one, right?” He asked the squirrel.

Something told him that Ao wasn’t quite like the average squirrel. When he felt more whimsical, he pictured the squirrel as something sent to him by his long dead precious person.

She had to be. Nothing else would willingly come near a curse.

His sad-eyed specter said nothing like always, but something in his manner suggested that maybe, just maybe, his crimson dream friend was actually coming.

Kija sat hiding from the girls of the village. Naturally a few of the village guards knew where he was, but they were kind enough not to let on to the girls where he was hiding.

(They were in fact amused at his frantic efforts to avoid them, but somehow they kept straight faces and never let on otherwise.)

He had another dream recently, one of the ones with the girl in them. Now there was the kind of girl he wouldn’t mind marrying. Someone who didn’t fawn over him, who treated him like most everyone else.

“I can’t wait to meet her and the others.” He murmured, not quite sure why but knowing it to be true all the same.

Until his master came, he was to remain in the village, keeping the dragon’s power safe. If his master came. Intruders who even reached the village edge were scarce, let alone one captured alive. According to those villagers who made their way in the outside world, the vicinity of the village was called cursed, where none who went in came back out.

“Fools. Don’t they remember about Hiryyuu-ou-sama?” Sighing to himself, he watched the sky.

Several minutes later, one of the villager guards approached. “Hakuryuu-sama, Baa-Baa is searching for you.”

“I’ll be right out.” He answered.

He fervently hoped it wasn’t about a potential wife. The village wasn’t that big after all, and he was sure he had already met every eligible and fertile woman available.

“Just where do you think you’re going without me?”

Cursing in his head, Hak turned to see Yona, wearing a dress with shorter skirts and her cloak. Tae-woo gave up his sleeping ruse to watch the fireworks. “Did you really think you could sneak away?” She asked flatly.
“I already set it up with Gramps. You’ll live the rest of your life peacefully and safely here in Fuuga.” He answered.

He refused to be intimidated as she approached (stalked) closer. “Even if the whole city to a man keeps their silence, all it would take is one outsider to make mention of a girl with crimson hair to possibly bring Su-won down on me.” She pointed out. “And I don’t remember discharging you from the duty you swore to Father.”

“I swore that duty as General Son Hak. I’ve given up the title of General and the name ‘Son’. I’m just Hak now.” He told her.

Turning to leave, he found her blocking his path. “I never said anything about wanting General Son Hak.” He couldn’t figure out the look in her eyes. “I want Hak, I don’t want to live under a rock safe while you’re risking your life by taking blame for a crime that isn’t yours. Even if you leave me behind here, I’m not staying. I’m going to go find them, and prove myself worthy of borrowing their power.”

“You wouldn’t get far, without weapons or clue on how to survive in the open.” He protested. “Besides, can you pay me what my time and labor would be worth as a bodyguard? Or do you plan to pay a different way?” He moved to what would usually be an uncomfortably close distance from her, so close that their clothes were almost touching.

Yona reached up and fisted her hands in his jacket. “Even if I was planning on paying that way, you’re too honorable to ever accept it.” She said quietly.

She leaned her head on his chest. “You’re the only one left. The only one left alive connected to ‘Yona’. Everyone else is dead, and those to come will be because of him. We could have spent this life never meeting. Meeting this time…that has nothing to do with who we were. The memories we’ve made…they aren’t shadowed by the past.”

Hak felt his chest becoming wet as she began to cry. “I have nothing to keep you with me, beyond a vow you say you’re not bound by anymore and whatever feelings we shared. Must I lose both of you?”

Hak hugged her to him. He had been thinking in terms of practical and physical safety. He hadn’t thought in terms of emotions. She’s lost His Majesty, and might as well have lost Su-won. He reflected.

I can’t leave her too.

“You win.” He whispered. “The bill will be pretty steep when this is all over.”

She pulled away, rubbing her eyes. “Would three children cover it?” She asked, mischief in her voice.

He nearly dropped his weapon. “Uhh…”

“You wouldn’t think people would live here all the time.” Yona commented as they surveyed the valley where Mundok said the oracle lived.

Hak had been saved from answering with his appearance. Thankfully, Mundok had been too mad about Hak betraying the eternal fidelity to call him on the ‘payment’ he’d suggested.

“In the deserts between the Kai Empire and the Steppe People, it’s said that it teems with life after the
sun goes down. If you know what you’re doing, this would be a far more comfortable place to carve out a home then those deserts.”

“You mean the ones called the Dragons’ Graveyards?” She asked. “The bones that are said to be there aren’t dragons. They are of the beings whose demise opened the door for humans.”

“Really?” Guen asked, curious.

“Most of the time, the gods just watch and let things happen, after seeding life on Earth. Without the random chance of Fate, humans never would have been. One of the groups of beings that arose after the deaths of the previous beings caught the dragons’ eye, and they made them human.” She explained. “Dragon-me hadn’t really been involved with that, until the time came to kindle the Spark of Self that sets humans apart. That might be why dragon-me decided to become human; I’m not sure.”

“‘Spark of Self’?” Shuten had to ask.

“The soul.” She clarified. “Humans had existed before that, but they weren’t people until that happened.”

“As interesting as this is, you do realize we’ll have to camp out if we want to search this place fully.” Hak reminded her. “Plus it generally gets colder here then the mountains around Kuuto.”

“You mean you’re not going to keep me warm at night?” Yona asked with a sly look. “Guess I’ll have to keep myself warm.”

His brain derailed at the first implication, Hak dropped his weapon as the second one hit. Leaning down to pick it up, he noticed the group approaching at the same time Abi said, “Incoming.”

“How many?” She asked, turning serious.

“…fifty. There were a hundred, but Ouryuu was able to divert half. I dare say they won’t survive.” Abi reported.

“Are they royal troops?” Hak asked. “Or Fire?”

“Fire. Looks like the second son is trying to impress his father, after being told off for attacking the merchants.” Abi, well aware of the futility that sons born after the first drowned in, said with a frown.

“Just try and hold onto me.” Hak ordered Yona, who clung to his torso as strong as she could.

“Hak you liar…” Yona whispered, taking in her bloodstained palm.

None of the Fire soldiers had gotten close enough to leave blood on Hak. It had to be from the arrow he took for her.

It didn’t matter how many battles she could remember from him-her; memories did not equal reality, and she froze despite herself.

She crept along the crevice Hak had hidden her in, stopping just at the bushes that concealed the opening. Kan Tae-Jun was speaking to a soldier armed with a bow. “You fired a poisoned arrow at the princess?!” He screeched.

“We knew General Hak would intercept it. He really is a beast; it’s strong enough to down five
men.” The soldier explained.

Poison.

*If it was just a regular fight, with Hak at full strength, I could trust that he’d win. But not with an unknown poison in his blood. She bit her lip. What can I do? A dagger is useless in this case.*

Her mind conjured up all the times when the sense of powerlessness hit her, and him—her.

Their father’s body hitting the floor, killed by someone trusted.

The mourning after Mother’s death, both of them.

The girl who hardly had a chance to live that nothing at the time could save.

The execution, tempered with the knowledge that there were those so completely opposed to what he had been trying to accomplish as to do anything for the chance to kill him.

*I can’t ask after my divination if I’m willing to let fear and helplessness overcome me. If I’m not willing to help myself, and take even the most basic means of protecting myself and those I love…*

…I have no business being here at all.

She darted out, throwing her body weight into the soldier with the bow, ready to fire what was sure to be another poisoned arrow at Hak. She turned and glared at Tae-Jun, who found himself facing an inferno.

Guen, Abi, and Shuten froze, amidst doing the little they could to hinder the soldiers.

Zeno, blood-spattered and scaled, and Kaya, peeking through her fingers, zeroed in on the blaze that surrounded Yona, unseen by mortal eyes.

Tae-Jun could only stare, slack-jawed, as anything he could have said to try and persuade the princess to go with him fled his mind. “Why did you put pressure on the Wind Tribe?” The blaze demanded.

“I—that was Father—“

“Why attack the merchants?” Her hair was a flame, haloing her head. “If you have time to be doing all of that, then there’s clearly more important things you should be doing. Especially in light of the famine in your lands and conspiring with a royal traitor.”

Tae-Jun found himself scared to even breathe.

Meanwhile, Hak, cursing idiot dragon-king-princesses that couldn’t follow a simple two word command, was flagging, despite the aid the trio had given him.

Before he knew it, he was hanging off the sheer face of the cliff, his weapon falling beyond his reach. “Yes, finish him off!” Tae-Jun ordered, the excitement of having his rival for the Princess’s affections killed distracting him from his terror.

Her insides turned to ice, despite the fire. *Ha-kun’s…Hak’s…they’re going to die!*

Darting past the second son of the Fire General, she was stopped as he grabbed the easiest thing for him to catch.
Her hair.

He was speaking, but her blood was racing and boiling too much for her to hear him.

If he wasn’t going to let her go to Hak, she’d have to make him.

Yona’s eyes locked onto the sword at his hip. Seizing it, she cut herself free, barely pausing to glare at this fool who tried to stop her through the falling embers of hair before taking off to Hak.

“I need to get close enough to dive after them!” Leaving behind the dead soldiers, Zeno shot forward, towards the edge Hak hung from.

The enemy was so distracted by the impending kill that they didn’t notice him leaping over the edge, burying his now clawed hand into the rock. Bracing his feet on the cliff face, Zeno disregarded this new development and what it meant to focus in on Hak, and the likeliest path of descent.

“Get away from Hak!” The few remaining soldiers turned, to find an inferno glaring them down with a sword.

“I SAID GET AWAY FROM HIM!” She yelled, running forward and taking a swing at them.

(A small corner of her thoughts noted that the eerily familiar weight of the purloined long sword was too heavy for her untrained body.)

She managed to place herself between them and Hak’s position, Tae-Jun’s orders and their own shock enough for them to back away well beyond the sword’s reach. Tossing the sword aside, she knelt down to try and pull Hak up. “You idiot! I told you to run!” Hak scolded her, too spent from the poison to try and help.

Rain fell on his face. “I told you; you’re the only one left. I won’t lose you too! So if you die I’ll never, ever forgive you!” Improbably, Hak saw another weeping face over Yona’s, berating him (her?) for taking such a stupid risk and really I’m your husband you can trust me and don’t you dare leave me.

Hearing Tae-Jun order the remaining handful of troops to pull her away, she looked over her shoulder. This, unfortunately, was enough to throw off her balance enough for her to fall off the edge. Screaming as the realization of falling hit, she was only dimly aware of Hak pulling her close to him, trying to shield her with his body as they fell through the trees, all of his attempts to stop their descent failing.

She passed out as they both hit something hard and scaled, the connection of what it was the last thing crossing her mind.

“Oww…” Zeno couldn’t help saying.

He had a very high pain tolerance (more like inability to register pain, to be technical), but cushioning the weight of two young adults in his scaled form was new enough for him to feel it. “At least Zeno’s insides get as hard as his outsides when the scales are out.”

“…you didn’t remember that by being under prophecy, Yona at least would survive the fall?” Guen commented.

“Like all of you weren’t panicked too!” He protested, wiggling his way out from under the pair. “And all the prophecies in the world wouldn’t mean a damn thing if Hak died.”
“Someone’s coming.” Abi interrupted before Shuten could add in his bit and trigger a fight.

All five of them hid, the spirits unsure if whomever was approaching would be able to see them.

It was an androgynous youth, singing to himself with an apple to snack on. “What a pain…a pair of corpses…”

The voice and manner of speaking indicated it was a boy. Moving to check the pair, the boy was shocked to find them still alive. “That’s weird; I guess the trees and this guy were able to slow the descent enough to make it potentially survivable…” He said to himself, peering up at the trees suspiciously. “I’m gonna need Ik-su’s help to get them to the house.” Standing from his crouch, the boy went back the way he came.

“…so why does your arm look like mine?” Guen asked once Abi confirmed the boy was out of earshot.

“Hey, you’re right!” Shuten exclaimed, just now noticing. “What’s up with that? It’s new, isn’t it?”

“The other night, I saw Ouryuu-kami.” Zeno answered. “He explained some things…but one day, I’ll be able to join everyone in Heaven.”

“Was what Kaya suggested to us true? That Ouryuu-kami actually gave you his body?” Abi asked.

“In a sense. He had sent a part of himself to be born human, so it was more like becoming whole again.” He explained.

“Well that explains why he picked someone completely useless in battle.” Shuten commented.

Zeno punched him, sending him flying. “Did I mention that since Ouryuu-kami was able to make contact with me, I can touch all of you like we were in the same plane of existence?” He said innocently.

Guen, Abi, and Kaya all carefully avoiding looking at each other as Shuten stalked back, practically enveloped in a cloud of frustration.

Chapter End Notes

Between Yona wanting to be Kija’s friend and his own desire for a friend, Kija can’t make the mental connection regarding who Yona is.
Su-won hardly registered his directions to Kei-shuk regarding Kan Tae-Jun, let alone the frantic demands to be punished, as he walked away.

It had scarcely been a week since that night.

Only when he was safely inside his rooms and contemplating the bundle of hair with her book did the tears come.

If Yona was dead, that meant Hak was dead too. He would never permit her death as long as he clung to life.

“How can this be all that remains?” He whispered.

His lingering doubts about continuing his translation were gone. Even though it appeared to be a retelling of the birth myth…

He couldn’t let hair and a name on a genealogy be the only traces to remain.

He had already given orders that her suite of rooms was to be preserved. He had no intention of rescinding that order, as he did not want her death to be public knowledge. Let it be one of those unanswerable mysteries history tosses out from time to time.

And if by some improbably miracle she had survived…

“Either way, something tells me that whatever she wrote is important.” He told himself, picking up his brush.

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He gnawed on the pendant that had descended with him, once he managed to maneuver it into his mouth. When he had chosen to become a human infant, he didn’t realize just how completely dependent on older humans they were. He couldn’t decide if the lack of control over his movement or the aching gums was worse.

The sounds of an ox carriage drew his attention to the road next to where he lay in the reeds. Trying and failing to clearly make out the carriage and the humans around it, he decided that blurry vision was the worst.

He jumped as a male picked him and carried him over to the cart. “It’s an infant Your Highness.”

He blinked. He wasn’t expected to answer, was he?

“I’m surprised you spotted him my Lady, even with the hair.” A younger female commented. “But where is he from, to have hair of that color?”

“…it seems my prayer was answered, if not quite as I had hoped.” The female holding him whispered, ignoring the question.
He found his head resting against the elder female’s chest as the carriage started up again, one hand supporting his bottom and the other cradling his head. He found himself yawning and his eyelids grow heavy the longer the carriage was in motion and the more he listened to the thumping from the chest beneath him.

‘Wait, this is a heartbeat, isn’t it?’ He said inside of himself. ‘I never expected it to be as soothing as my brothers’ voices and energies.’

So far, being human was difference from what he expected. No control over his own body, no way to communicate, and completely dependent on the goodwill of others.

But he did not regret anything so far. There may be a day when that changed, but for now, he was warm and comfortable.

He started when the carriage stopped, the sun just now gone for the day. He hadn’t realized that he had fallen asleep. He felt more than heard the voice of the female—woman, he needed to remember that—holding him as she gave orders to fetch someone. “I have returned, my lord husband.” She bowed, and he wriggled enough to turn his head to see an elder male—man—who he guessed to be about the same age as the woman, with a certain air of authority.

“I welcome you back, my lady wife.” He replied, the whole exchange feeling more like a show for others, with the underlying warmth in the voices.

He was too distracted by taking in as much of the surroundings he was now in as he could to notice when the couple entered a private, comfortable room, and orders for food given. “It’s good to have you home again, Cheonsa.” The man said.

“It’s good to be home again, Il.” She answered with a smile.

“I notice you brought a little extra someone back with you.” The man’s face came into sharp focus as he was handed over to him.

His eyes glued to the dangling cords of Il’s headdress, and before he realized it, he had gotten a hold of one and starting chew on it. The couple laughed as he made a face, and decided it wasn’t as satisfying to gnaw on as his pendant. “He was in the reeds beside the road from the Crimson Dragon God’s shrine.” Cheonsa began. “No one else noticed him until I pointed him out.”

Wait, he had a shrine? That was a new one. True he moved as a specter on Earth more than his brothers, but he hadn’t thought he had done anything to warrant being worshiped.

“I had hoped, perhaps, that I would be able to carry to term and give you a healthy child after spending three nights there. If any god could fix what keeps me from kindling new life, it would have been him.” She continued. “I guess…what I had hoped for was too much to ask.”

He found himself ashamed to admit to himself that he had no clue what she was referring to. Women came and prayed at his shrine if they couldn’t conceive? How many women had offered up prayers to him to help them, only for their hopes to be in vain?

Suddenly he was back in her arms, being swayed back and forth. There were strange sounds, like the cries of young animals, and it hit him that he was making those noises.

Between the swaying and the nonsense murmured into his ear, he was able to stop. He rubbed his head against Cheonsa’s neck in apology, the way he would have if he’d upset one of his brothers too much. “…I think,” Il finally spoke. “That it’s not that it was too much to hope for, but that the gods do not always hear us.”
He ran a thumb over the pendant his yellow brother created. “Chance may have let you find him, or it may have been Fate.” Il embraced his wife, with him cradled between them. “And haven’t I told you that I am willing to consider that there may be some fault in me? I was…rather free…with my affection before our marriage, yet no one has come forward. All of them could not possibly have the same problem.”

“I know. But outside these walls, it is me who bears the blame, and you the scorn of not looking elsewhere.” She answered him. “But enough of that for now. We need a name.”

Il eyed both his hair and the pendant, considering. “…Hiryuu…?” He found himself grinning. “I think we have a winner.” She said with a smile. “Even if what he was stays between the three of us, no one can think the name blasphemous, as he carries the Mark of the Dragon Gods.”

Thus the human self of the Crimson Dragon God was named Hiryuu. To outsiders, a statement of his hair and the mark he was found carrying.

The newly-named Hiryuu was pleased that his parents had realized what he had been. Even in this short time, it felt wrong to keep this from them, no matter how hampered he was in communicating.

“I sent for Yun-an.” She told Il. “She just had a girl, and I think her son will be pleased to potentially have a male playmate once Hiryuu is bigger.”

“I defer to your judgment, my lady.” Il teased, bowing slightly as a knock on the door disrupted the moment.

Hiryuu discovered another thing to add to his list, of what the worst part of being an infant was.

A small part of him had been fascinated by the chance to taste the food behind some of the delicious smells he had come across.

But without teeth, he couldn’t eat any of it.

He noticed his parents (and how weird and new a concept it was, parents) hiding smiles at his fascination and frustration with their meal, but he was too busy sulking to pay it much mind.

Before he realized it, the meal had ended, and there was now another woman in the room, younger than Cheonsa, with a newborn infant slung on her chest and a small boy trailing behind. “How come his hair’s red?” The boy asked, cutting into the adults’ conversation over the new woman becoming his ‘nurse’.

“That’s just the way he was born.” His mother answered, turning back to Cheonsa as they went back and forth on if there should be payment and how much.

Hiryuu studied the boy who was the son of his ‘nurse’. His hair was a sandy brown, with ocean blue eyes. “I’m Guen.” The boy introduced himself. “I hope you grow up fast, cuz Pa’s too busy most of the time to play with me, and when he does have time, he’s always teaching me how to beat people up, which is fun, but you can’t play hide and seek by yourself…”

Hiryuu smiled and waved his arms as Guen continued describing all the games he wanted to play once Hiryuu was bigger. He couldn’t wait to play them too.

The women shared smiles as the late hour got to Guen and he curled up on the floor next to Hiryuu, curling an arm around his small body and pulling him close.
Guen didn’t fully understand what was going on, but he knew that he had to keep Hiryuu safe. “…and when we’re all grown up we can go beat people up together and keep them from hurting others and they’ll never ever touch you cuz I’ll be there like Pa is with His Highness and if they wanna hurt you they’ll hafta hurt me…” His voice trailed off as he gave into sleep, and Hiryuu watched him with a soft smile.

“I should feed him and start learning his pattern, but I don’t think Guen will let him go.” Yun-an whispered.

“Hiryuu’s only cried once since I found him, and I was able to calm him, so I think he’ll be fine for a few more hours.” Cheonsa replied.

Hiryuu yawned. Being an infant was more tiring than he had fully realized. He guessed it was because everything was new.

Falling asleep, he went inside himself, where his dragon self was tending their fire. He took the appearance of a boy Guen’s age, with his bright crimson hair cropped to his ears. “I’m not sure what happened.” He admitted. “I know that you’re me, well I’m you since you’re way older. But why are we separate?”

“I don’t know either.” Dragon-him replied. “I believe, however, that I am the embodiment of our power, in the form of what we had been in Heaven. Although now that we’ve done this, I see that it was a risky thing. Our fire wasn’t meant for a human body.”

“Will it kill us?”

“I’m tempering it. That may be another reason why we are separate. To survive as a human, there needed to be something to keep us from being consumed.” Dragon-him answered. “Are you having regrets?”

“…not about doing this, but about stuff I didn’t realize before.” He admitted.

“We can only move forward, and do better in the tomorrows to come.” Gently, his dragon-self nuzzled his head. “Now let’s dream of those games Guen described.”

He didn’t dream of the games, but of fighting together. His crimson hair was a banner drawing friend and foe to him, but with Guen taking out all the enemies, he found himself a little put out. “Do I have to order you to let me fight?”

“You ARE fighting, King.”

“I’m on a battlefield, getting bored because you’re hogging all the fun.” Hiryuu struck down a man coming up behind Guen. “You need someone to watch your back as well.”

Guen rolled his eyes, but gave in.

An empty feeling in his stomach drew Hiryuu from the dream, but he was left with one question.

Why was Guen’s hair white in the dream?

“Why give them your parents’ names?” Su-won murmured to himself, cleaning up his desk so he could get an hour or two of sleep before the purification preceding the enthronement. “Not sure what to think of the circumstances either…”
Rubbing his temples, he let himself sag into the futon. Closing his eyes, he could still see Yona glaring at him. He didn’t doubt that this new Yona could have left this life without a fight. Tae-Jun had described how he had grabbed her hair to keep her from running to Hak’s aid, and how she cut herself free.

Somehow, it struck him as her cutting free of the past, letting it blow away on the wind.

Close to dozing off, he jolted when he realized something. “Wait…all the ink blots are before the male pronouns referring to Hiryuu…”

But there’s no way…

Yun frowned down at his patients. They did not have the injuries he would have expected from falling off a cliff and through tree branches.

The man had been attacked fiercely, and he couldn’t figure out how he was still alive, once he placed the poison tainting the arrow wound. That alone should have been near fatal, even without the slash across the chest.

“With all his muscles, he’s definitely a well-trained fighter. Maybe that has something to do with it…” Yun mused out loud. “But if the chest wound was after the arrow, the fighting should have accelerated the poison’s effect…”

After those two wounds, the cuts to the head and arms were laughably minor. His right hand was swollen, and while none of the bones felt like they had broken, he had splinted the hand as best he could to be safe.

The girl was in better shape injury-wise. Her hair appeared to have been crudely hacked off to its current length. A few cuts to the head, and one wrist was swollen. Her hand had been bloody, but there was nothing bleeding on her head. “Guess it’s from that guy…”

Sighing, Yun turned to the items he had retrieved from her sash and dress when he was examining and treating her.

A wooden comb, stained cherry-red and carved like a rose.

A fancy and expensive looking hairpin, mostly enameled, but with pearls dangling and lavender jade on the butterfly.

A high quality dagger that looked like it could have been worth enough to feed himself and Ik-su for a year. Not that he could have sold it legitimately, with the five dragons decorating the sheath marking it as a royal item.

Considering the dragons on the dagger, the last item was almost an afterthought, confirming the suspicions raised by the dagger.

A seal, carved out of jade, the mouth of the dragon open at the end carved with the characters. Stamping it on the inside cover of his medical book confirmed her identity.

Crown Princess Yona.

Scowling, Yun stalked outside into the night air. Ik-su was probably at the cliff overlooking the waterfall, either having dozed off while praying or so caught up in the voices that he didn’t realize the late hour.
“Maybe I should have left them for dead.” Yun told the stars. “It’s not like she has any clue about the way the world really is. What it’s like to starve and freeze, or be dehydrated…”

Except it was against his private vow to never turn away anyone who needed medical treatment.

“But what is she doing all the way out here? The guy has to be her guard, since she had been cradled on top of him. Doubt a kidnapper would have shown that much consideration.” Yun wondered.

He shivered, suddenly feeling a chill that had nothing to do with the night air. It felt like someone was glaring at him, trying to kill him with a look. “Geeze you’ve spent too much time with that idiot oracle. All his rambling on what the gods and spirits and ghosts say is making your mind as loopy as his.” He scolded himself as he went back inside.

Guen and Shuten had had to tackle Abi to keep him from paralyzing the boy who was the only competent medical help available to Hak and Yona. “Sheesh, I know you were kind of a doctor before the dragons, but don’t you think you’re being a little extreme?” Shuten asked, baffled at Abi’s reaction. “He still did help them, and I doubt he’d stop now, if only for the money.”

“I watched too many people with pox and mangled limbs be turned away by Father and Elder Brother because they could not pay or they feared the pox, while tripping over themselves to help panicky lords who thought a paper cut would kill them.” Abi glared at Shuten. “Anyone just in it for the money has no business treating people, let alone taking the Oath of Souryuu.”

The pronunciation had shifted over the millennia, but it was once the Oath of Seiryuu doctors swore upon completing the apprenticeship, swearing to treat all people fairly and equally, no matter the illness or social standing. There were the fair share of doctors who only paid lip service to the Oath, but it was still in force.

“Still, would you rather leave their recovery up to the oracle? The man trips over air!” Guen reminded him.

“It can’t be helped. They can see what could be and so tend to lose track of what is.” Zeno explained, frowning at his arm as he tried to get the scales to appear at will.

“You weren’t like that.” Guen commented.

“Zeno was a priest Before, and played at one After.”

“…there’s a difference?” Shuten finally asked.

Zeno rolled his eyes. “All oracles are priests, but not all priests are oracles. Both can hear the gods, but oracles can also see a future that could be. From what the old man at Zeno’s temple said before he died, it can be anywhere between a hazy image to as real as the present. That said, he could just be clumsy, period, and being an oracle just makes it worse.”

“A future?” Kaya asked. “Doesn’t Zeno mean the future?”

“Nothing is set until it happens. You can know how the story goes, but until you write it down, you don’t know the details and Zeno has no clue where he’s getting all that from.” He sighed, giving up on generating scales at will for the moment.

“Yona should wake up soon, right?” Abi asked, calming down. “How far does feeling her go?”

“Zeno can feel that she’s in a regular sleep right now. As for feeling her…” Zeno frowned as he thought of how to explain it. “It’s like a torch is inside of him. I could feel how happy she would be
to see me, before she could say the words. When her mother was killed, I could feel her grief, but it was almost an echo of what she was feeling. I can tell the difference between what’s my feeling and what’s hers.”

“Why didn’t this happen with us and Hiryuu-ou?” Guen asked. “Would have been useful, since we’d have known he was getting weaker before he passed out that time.”

“When we drank the dragon’s blood and underwent the awakening, we weren’t right in front of him. All of us, even you Guen, were anywhere between a few hundred feet and twenty miles away. This time, Zeno and Yona’s eyes met and they were in each other’s personal space when the awakening occurred.” Abi proposed.

“But she also said once that she could see this generation’s dragons in her dreams.” Kaya pointed out. “They haven’t met for real yet.”

“We can’t rule out Hiryuu-sama visiting the current generation before actually going through with reincarnating.” Shutren said. “It’s not like we were watching him in the time between him leaving Heaven for the last time and becoming Yona.”

“Zeno is still curious about why he was able to see all of you after a year of visiting the Miss. He hadn’t spent much time with her the first time, but the second visit he could feel all of you.” Zeno commented. “Even if grief and pain was keeping me from seeing you…”

Kaya hugged on his torso as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Zeno had stopped waiting for a far off chance. It was real, being with Hiryuu-sama and the dragons, after meeting her.”

“Zeno still feels that there might be something more to it.”

There was something dripping into her mouth.

Groaning, Yona opened her eyes. Someone was squeezing the juice from a piece of orange into her mouth. “Who…?”

“Oh you’re awake. Good, my arms are tired.” The piece was abruptly put in her mouth.

She first thought she was seeing him-her’s nurse Yun-an, or her younger daughter Yun-mei, reborn, but the soul felt different enough to tell her that the boy wasn’t either of their reincarnations. He still felt similar, so he must be their descendant from some point.

“Who are you?” She asked as she chewed on the orange piece.

“Yun. Just a passing pretty boy genius, no need to concern yourself with me.” He said shortly, turning back to his mortar and pestle. “The guy’s still alive.”

“Hak!” Shooting up, she saw Hak to her right.

Kneeling beside him, she took stock of his injuries. “He must have slowed the fall enough for you two to reach the ground in one piece. He was cradling you, you lovers?” Yun asked, his abrupt manner telling her that he had recognized her, and was not happy about it.

“…not yet.” She admitted with a blush, gently touching a spot uncovered by bandages.

It was hot and clammy, but he was alive. “He’s got a fever from the poison, but if he makes it through tonight and it breaks, he’ll be fine.” Any further comments from Yun were cut off as a man
covered in dust burst in. “I tripped!”

“Seriously, how are you still alive? Give up and go back to Heaven!” Yun shoved his foot at the man, as if to kick him, but there was nothing but affection under the short tone.

“I’m Ik-su. I’m sort of Yun’s guardian.” The man introduced himself, Yun tossing a clean robe on his head. “My job is to pray for people.”

“What job? You’re not being paid!”

“Are you the oracle?” Yona asked. “Mundok, the elder of the Wind Tribe told us that there was an oracle living in the valley beneath the cliffs.”

“Ah, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen Mudok-sama!” Ik-su exclaimed beaming. “How fares he?”

“Still a grandfather to every child he meets.” Yona surprised Yun by bowing, lower than he’d have thought. “Thank you for taking us into your home, lord oracles.”

“I’m not an oracle; I just keep this guy alive.” Yun denied.

Hak drew attention back to him when he groaned and started panting. Shoving Yona to the side, Yun felt his temperature. “Gone up a bit. Not much to do but wait for it to break.”

Yona murmured her thanks as she caught sight of the items she had on her lined up at the head of where she’d been laying. Tucking all but the hairpin away, she just stared at it, finally forcing herself to tuck it away.

Su-won...why...

Chapter End Notes

Okay, past! Cheonsa is early thirties; the stress from being childless started premature greying. So we’ll say thirty three, with Yun-an being twenty nine and past! Il thirty six. Guen is four (and a half); Hiryu is three months old physically (less than a day counting from when he appeared on Earth), and the unnamed baby sister (not Yun-mei) of Guen’s six weeks old.
Chapter 16

“Maybe you should get some air and accompany me on a walk?” Ik-su suggested gently, having changed into a fresh robe.

Bowing to Yun, to the depth proper for a respected physician (and shocking the boy in the process), Yona slipped her shoes on and let Ik-su lead her outside. Out of ear-shot of the house, she was besieged by Guen, Abi, and Shuten. “Are you alright?” Abi asked, poking and prodding and examining Yun’s work with a critical eye.

“We had to keep Abi from paralyzing the kid, once he wondered if he should have left you and Hak for dead. Never mind that at this point, the kid will stick it out if only for the payment.” Shuten explained to Yona.

“I met Yun in one of the famine regions of Fire. He…has a low opinion of nobles and royalty.” Ik-su said. “Even if he does eventually charge you, I doubt it would be anywhere near the true value of his work.”

“He’s harsh in tone of voice, but at heart he’s kind. I think he’s a descendant of Yun-an and Yun-mei.” Yona commented. “So he’s your many times over great nephew Guen.”

“There is a family resemblance. You sure he’s not one of their reincarnations?” Guen admitted.

Yona shook her head. “His soul feels similar to them, but it’s not the same.”

“How long have they been with you?” Ik-su asked once the fussing was over. “You know who they are.”

“As long as I can remember in this life. Their names were my first words, and I know I didn’t get the names from them. The fire may have just lit, but I’ve always known, and been wary of losing track of ‘Yona’. This…was not how he thought things would turn out, when he decided to come back.” She answered, quietly marveling the sunset from the cliff.

A magenta eye peeked out through the thick fringe of hair, and she knew this was a true oracle. “Have you come to hear the gods?”

“…I came to hopefully gain some insight into what was said during my divination, as at present only myself and Su-won are confirmed as still living, out of those who were present.” She eventually answered.

“Ah, that was one of my first. Prince Yuhon had not been very happy, but His Late Majesty Ju-nam had managed to maintain peace.” Ik-su answered. “Your father and late mother did not seem overly surprised.”

“Father is dead now too, murdered by Su-won. Him-me…Hiryuu, I mean…visited them in dreams when I was conceived.” She informed him.

“Please refer to him in the way you feel most comfortable.” Ik-su suggested gently. “My deepest condolences on your loss. King Il will be missed.”

“You don’t need to lie. I know it is likely only Hak and myself miss him. Mundok as well.” She acknowledged, her glances back in the direction of the house growing more frequent.
“Yun is very skilled, and death has not come for your companion yet.” He assured her.

Still, he felt it prudent to head back anyway, as it was nearly dinner time.

Yun scowled down at his cooking. “Why couldn’t she be like every other spoiled royal?”

So far, Crown Princess Yona was not exactly as he expected. Thanking them for giving them shelter, bowing like he was some kind of esteemed doctor…

It would have been so much easier if she had met his expectations.

“It’s almost ready.” He told the pair when they returned from their walk.

The princess knelt back down next to her guard, the look on her face one Yun couldn’t puzzle out. It was ancient fondness and new love all together, which made no sense at all.

He had made chicken porridge, and managed to only be mildly surprised when he was thanked after handing the bowl over. “I’ve never had food this good!” She exclaimed upon tasting it. “Even Matron Su-mei doesn’t cook this good!”

Despite himself, Yun couldn’t help blushing. “You’re just exaggerating.” He protested, hiding his blush behind his bowl.

Halfway through she stopped, and her eyes started watering. “What’s wrong now?”

“…when I was a child, I had gotten a cold along with Su-won my cousin and Hak my guard. Mondok and Uncle Yuhon both came to visit, but Father didn’t. When I woke up hungry that night, the chicken porridge that came was completely terrible. Father had made it, since he had been too busy all day to come and visit. This is its opposite in terms of taste, but…it’s hard to fully accept what happened.” She explained, rubbing her eyes before finishing her bowl, hardly leaving a grain of rice behind.

“What did happen? I doubt you’re out here for your health.” Yun asked, curious as to just why she was in a remote place such as this.

“That’s right…it’s only been a week.” She commented. “On the night of my sixteenth birthday, my cousin, Su-won, murdered my father.”

Yun was shocked enough to drop his spoon into the pot. “What?! Why?”

“He said…he said it was because Father had killed Uncle Yuhon, his father. His advisor tried casting it as for the good of Kouka, but all he mentioned was avenging his father and taking the place that had been denied his father. I had gone to Father’s rooms, since I wanted to discuss the engagement he was planning for me, only to witness it.” She explained, accepting the refilled bowl, as Yun had divvied up the remainder between the three of them. “I know the country is in a poor state, but to hear it used to justify king slaying…the famine in the Fire Tribe’s lands is only the start.”

Yun couldn’t bring himself to utter the harsh comment on his tongue. Somehow, hearing Princess Yona flat out acknowledge the country was in a sad state took the bluster out of him. And with the story of King Il cooking for his daughter when she was sick?

He had suddenly been reminded that royals and nobles were people too.

Finishing quickly, Yun moved onto the task of getting at least a little broth into Hak, despite him
being unconscious. “I’m sorry if this is a painful subject, but why did my uncle expel the priests?” She asked.

“You lived in the castle and yet don’t know?” Yun questioned with a dirty look.

Guen burst in, unseen by Yun. “Oi, kid, she was FOUR!!! I’d like to hear how much of politics YOU cared for at the age!”

Yun couldn’t quite suppress the shiver that came over him as she met his gaze head on. In that moment, he forgot that she was barely sixteen. “I know they were expelled, and it was at my uncle’s direction, but what I don’t know is just what happened to cause it, and why my grandfather did not oppose it, or why Father did not reverse it once he came to the throne, or after Uncle’s death.” She replied evenly.

“I’m not sure of all the details, but Prince Yu-hon had been engaged to an elder sister of your late mother, a love match by all accounts. She fell ill, and he had many prayers offered up, praying for her health to be restored, but she died. I…my master at the time had been the one who offered up the prayers, and assured the prince they had been answered. When the prince came to him in a rage after her death, he shoved me in a closet. He…was not happy, and killed my master. After that, he began moving against the priests. His public motive was that the sovereign was the highest power in the land, and no one with serpent’s words should challenge that. There was a brief upturn, around the time of your birth, but it didn’t last long. As for why King Ju-nam allowed it to happen, or why King Il did not reverse it after his brother’s death, I don’t know.” Ik-su related, fiddling with his spoon.

“The upturn was because of my hair.” Yona stated.

Ik-su just nodded. “King Ju-nam remained a silent supporter of the priests, and I am sure that your hair color must have played some role, when he chose to pass over Prince Yu-hon and name Prince Il his successor.”

Yona fingered a lock of hair. “Uncle remains an honored figure in the military, and I’m sure Su-won was able to get the Sky Tribe on his side just by being the son of the person they felt should have been king. Maybe Uncle had too much sway in the military, so much that Grandfather did not want to risk civil war because of the priests, and focused his energy and time on securing Father’s ascension.”

“It is entirely possible.”

“What, so the priests got a brief boost because you apparently have the same hair color as Hiryuu-ou?” Yun questioned. “That doesn’t make much sense.”

“Faith does not require sense, beyond what is required for people to believe. And it is the same color. The exact same.” Yona replied, her voice and eyes distant as she stared at the lock of hair she was playing with.

Yun wasn’t quite sure what to make of this assertion.

Yona found herself awake in the middle of the night. She couldn’t place just what had woken her up, until she focused on where Hak was laying.

Had been lying.

He was gone.
She ran outside, startling Shuten. “Did you see where Hak went?!” She cried.

“Yeah he went towards the base of the cliff…” Shuten said, a little confused as he pointed in the relevant direction.

Watching her run off in the indicated direction, he just sighed. “Seriously, haven’t you learned over two lifetimes to always keep your significant other informed?”

Hak had said she had known he was going. He knew he’d been lying, but neither of them thought she’d wake up while they were gone.

“Idiots, the both of them.”

Guen, stargazing on the roof, and Abi, sitting next to him watching Hak and Yona, made noises of agreement. Zeno, having been following Hak at a safe(-ish) distance, had felt Yona wake up and panic.

“Mister might want to hurry back, before he worries the Miss more.” He said from the safety of his tree.

Hak, having found his primary weapon undamaged from falling off a cliff, just waved a hand at his follower and started back.

If his pace was faster than on his way out, he didn’t notice.

Yona tripped over an unseen root and hit the ground. She knew she was panicking, but she didn’t care. She didn’t know if he was fever-walking. In her haste, she hadn’t paid attention to if Yun and Ik-su were still in the hut. Had he died, and had they left to bury him without waking her?

Both of them were too kind to do something. But as stated, she was panicking. “Hak you idiot!” She screamed.

“Well I hadn’t expected you to wake up.” Starting, she turned to see him behind her, holding his primary weapon. “I wasn’t that close to death.”

Crouching down in front of her (his wince of pain hardly hidden), he said, “I went to get this.” Brandishing his guandao.

“It couldn’t have waited until morning?!” She cried, blinking rapidly. “You were hurt so bad…when I saw you gone, I…”

She swallowed hard. “Fate keeps playing with me…” She whispered. “Similar things are happening to me that happened to him…and I don’t know if they’ll always turn out the same…”

/I already lost both of my parents. I don’t want to lose you or the dragons, or anyone, again.

That’s a fool’s wish.

Then I’ll be the fool. I’m already an idiot, so I should just add to the list./

Hak had to shake his head to pull out of the memory (?). “Sorry.” He mumbled under his breath.

Shuffling closer, he reached for her face. “Keep this up and I’ll be tempted.” Leaning in, he went slow enough for her to pull away.

She didn’t, and closed the remaining distance herself.
Yona couldn’t help gasping a little as their lips met. Between him-her’s memories and her own dreams, she thought she’d known what to expect.

But it was different.

Reaching up, she buried her fingers in his hair, moving closer. Their chests brushing, she opened her mouth to let his curious tongue in. It was his turn to press closer, and he found himself moving his tongue around hers in a dance he didn’t remember learning or knowing of.

Finally, their lungs lounged a demand, and they pulled apart, panting. She felt flushed all over.

If him-her’s desire had been like instantly bringing a pot to boil, this was a slow simmer.

He rested his forehead against hers’. “I am definitely tempted now.” He whispered.

“So am I.” She whispered back. “I know this is sudden, with how what we expected has shattered beyond recognition…but I want you by my side for the rest of our days and beyond.”

“…way back when I met you for the first time, when you were just a toddler weirdly fascinated with me…it felt like coming home.” He admitted. “I’ll stay as long as you’ll have me.”

“I’m not letting you go.”

“Good.” He frowned. “Not sure why I suddenly have a headache though.”

Pulling back, she smothered a giggle. “Do you want to know, or would you rather guess?”

“…I get the feeling certain things had to be explained before they could progress smoothly.” He deadpanned. “Considering that without talking to Mistress Sayuri and whatever you can remember, I’m sure we wouldn’t have kissed.”

“Shuten was pressed into service as the ‘expert’.” Yona said with a smile. “But let’s head back. I know you’ll say you’re perfectly fine, but I know you’re lying.”

Watching the pair walk back holding hands, Guen had to comment to Shuten, whom he and Abi and Zeno had had to sit on to keep him from interrupting, “Seriously, when’d you become the guardian of her virtue?”

Shuten just shifted uncomfortably, unwilling to answer. “Must Kaya and the others resort to tickling?” Kaya asked, having learned long ago that Shuten was very ticklish.

“…can’t help it; I spent my life making sure girls were treated right, and even though I know hurting her isn’t very likely, it’s still my default.” He finally admitted. “Not like I can scare him either.”

“Thinking about it, we really should have guessed that it wasn’t just a case of blue balls.” Abi said.

“Well you’d know all about those, wouldn’t you?”

Abi just grabbed Shuten’s hair and slammed his face in the ground.

“Kind of weird that we practically fell onto the oracle.” Hak said in the morning, shamelessly eating the buns Yun was pulling off the grill.

“Oi; hands off!” Yun glared at the bun thief as Yona walked out, wondering where Ik-su had gone.
Her feet led her to a cliff with a beautiful view of a waterfall. Ik-su was sitting there, and she approached, he turned and she saw that he was crying. “I dreamed of you last night. You and our country.” He explained, wiping away the tears. “So you want to hear what was revealed in your divination?”

“I’m not sure…if I should hear it.” She admitted, only vaguely noting the approach of Yun and Hak. “I don’t know if I want to hear what the gods want. If him-me had done what they wanted all those years ago, none of us would be here now, as they would have smited guilty and innocent together.

“I plan to find the Dragon Warriors, and see this country with my own eyes. And maybe, one day, take back what was stolen from me, and reveal the truth of Father’s death. At the heart of it all…I want to survive, and ensure the survival of those I love.” Crazily, Yun and Hak both saw the image of a crimson-haired hair man over her.

Well, crazily for Yun. Hak had practically expected it at this point. “All else is secondary, in the end. That is nothing I need to hear from my dragon brothers.”

“Okay hold on a minute! Are you saying that you were supposedly Hiryuu-ou in your past life?!” Yun’s rational mind was struggling to cope.

“Nothing supposed about it.” Hak answered with arms crossed. “I’d be as doubtful as you, except I’ve seen too much to dismiss it.”

“…but you’re a girl!” Was all Yun could say.

“It was to fulfill a promise made in that time.” Yona answered Yun, the image of the man gone, leaving a young woman with ancient eyes.

“Your wish is every reason to learn what was said.” Ik-su cut it, letting his eyes peek through his hair. “You surviving will generate a storm that will catch up all of Kouka in its fury. Undoubtedly the fire of Hiryuu has kindled by now.”

She nodded in answer to the implied question, and he continued. “To live truly, and to find the Dragon Warriors means leaving here. You will not remain unmolested, and with Hak-sama your only protector…he will die.”

“OI! Don’t kill me off yet!” Hak grumbled.

He’d admit that it had been a close call, and having some meat shields would be nice…

“If you wish to survive, and accomplish all that you hope to do…I will share what was revealed in your divination.” Ik-su brought his hands together and raised his head to the sky.

Darkness falls upon the great earth

Through the blood of dragons, a revival comes again

Bound by the covenant of old

When the Four Dragons assemble

The sword and shield that protect the monarch shall awaken

And the red dragon shall return at dawn
Finished, Ik-su keeled over. “Conveying the voice of the gods takes a lot of spiritual strength…”

“Stop the old man routine, you idiot.” Yun scolded as he crouching next to him.

“The hell? That makes no sense at lot!” Hak complained. “They’re worse than courtiers. Them you can puzzle out an agenda. Right, Hime-san?”

Yona was staring at the sky, her eyes glazed over. “Hime-san?” Growing concerned, Hak moved to stand in front of her. “Hime-san? YONA!”

Shouting her name startled her out of whatever trance she was in. “Ha-k—I’m sorry.” She shook her head to clear it. “I was trying to pull from him, to learn if he had any idea of what the divination meant.”

“You can remember being him?!” Yun was two parts freaked out, one part excited. A chance to learn about the founding of Kouka from the source!

“Not quite. I can feel him, and the dragon we had been, and have been able to for as long as I can remember. There’s plenty I know passively from him, like reading and the names of the first generation dragons and his family, but I’ve always had to be very careful if I tried actively trying to remember something from him, or I’d lose who I was. Who ‘Yona’ was. After Hiryuu’s fire lit, I established firmly who ‘Yona’ is in relation to ‘Hiryuu’, but that’s the first time I’ve tried reaching for anything.” Yona explained, sagging a little into Hak, who quietly cheered.

Shuten was once again wedged between the ground and his dragon brothers, Kaya on standby with a feather from somewhere.

“WERE you able to pulling anything?” Hak asked.

“…part of the reason was that my parents had married. They were the reincarnations of the couple who adopted Hiryuu after he descended, but I already knew that. There was a sense of darkness, and something about Uncle Yu-hon.” She answered.

“Huh? So they took him in after he descended?” Yun asked, curiosity overcoming any weirdness he felt regarding the revelation.

“She shook her head. “He decided to descend as an infant, so his ignorance wouldn’t stand out. He wanted to experience life as humans did, and just descending in human form wouldn’t have allowed that.” She smiled slightly to herself. “Past-mother couldn’t conceive, and she found him on her way back from his shrine. Women would go and pray for children. It was rather…shameful, to realize how many women had their prayers go unacknowledged, let alone unanswered.”

Yun tried picturing Hiryuu-ou as a baby and felt his brain freeze. “So step one is to find the Dragon Warriors, then this sword and shield will awaken?” He turned the conversation back to what the gods had said through Ik-su.

“I was already planning on seeking them out, but I don’t know anything about a sword or shield. What he used back then were just regular items, and although the sword was handed down for a few generations, it was lost during the First Chaos.” She said with a frown, referring to when the five times great grandson of Hiryuu died childless, and sparked the first dynasty change. “There had been so much infighting that it wouldn’t be surprising if one faction destroyed the sword, if only to keep anyone else from claiming it and the right to rule. A replica was made at the end, for King Chang’s ascension.”

Yun found himself itching for something to write with. Writing couldn’t be that hard, right?
“Either way, Fate has led you here, and has let you survive to this point.” Ik-su said. “But no matter what the gods want, it is still up to you to make things happen. To live truly and not just survive… that is something that only you can want to do.”

Yona found herself at a loss of what to do with herself. Yun had pushed Hak back into bed to rest and started sewing something, and Ik-su had stayed at the waterfall to continue meditating. Guen, Abi, and Shuten were all keeping watch, despite the unlikelihood of anyone attacking here. “I hope you find me worthy of borrowing your power…but I can’t blame you if you don’t.” She whispered, gazing off into the direction she thought Zeno was in.

“Kaya thinks that this is as much about proving to yourself that you are worthy, as much as proving to him” Kaya said as she walked over and sat down next to Yona.

“Thank you, Kaya.” She smiled briefly. “It’s strange; I know you, yet I don’t at the same time.”

“We haven’t really had any girl time since you were a child.” Kaya commented.

“Sorry I didn’t talk to you about my dreams.” Yona finally said.

“It’s alright. Zeno is like your brother, and Kaya knows she could never have approached her brother’s wife about the kinds of dreams you were having.” She waved it off. “You’ve dreamed of this generation’s dragons, right? What are they like?”

“Hakuryuu is the only one with a positive experience with his power, but at the same time it’s isolated him. So much longing has built up over the generations that anyone else would crumble under it. I don’t think he realizes he’s been dreaming of me, between me wanting to connect to him as a friend and his own desire for a friend. Seiryuu…his clan lost its heritage generations ago, and view the dragon’s eyes as a curse that keeps returning. They don’t even name the Seiryuu anymore. Ryokuryuu is actively scornful of the dragons’ legacy. To try and keep the Ryokuryuu safe, his clan would chain them down. It cycles between them being chained, to being free, until one accidently draws attention and they are chained all over again. He escaped, but he will be hard to pin down.”

She related what she had picked up over the years from the dreams. “Hakuryuu seems earnest and is rather shy about girls. He’s the prime marriage pick, and since village law permits multiple wives as long as all parties are in favor…”

Kaya giggled. “Guen had said he was always running from girls, his successor. Hard to imagine how he’ll react, with his master being a girl and the state of things between you and Hak now.” She sent Yona a sly look. “They have to sit on Shuten when the pair of you get ‘too close’. He knows Hak won’t hurt you, but it’s his default reaction.”

Yona couldn’t help her blush. “I shouldn’t be surprised, with his history, but I had hoped he’d trust the two of us more.”

“Knee-jerk reaction.” Kaya said with a shrug. “What’s Seiryuu like?”

“He’s quiet, but I think it’s more because he is isolated in his village. Between the mask and their fears about the Dragon’s Eyes, he doesn’t have much reason to talk, and less to explain what he is doing. But he’s kind.”

“And Shuten’s?”

“Seems like a flatterer. Very much into beauty, probably because of the ugly circumstances of his childhood. Free-spirited, but loyal at the same time. Likes to flirt.” Yona couldn’t help her grin. “If I hadn’t been having tea with Mistress Sayuri all these years, it would fly over my head.”
“So what IS happening between you and Hak? That was some kiss last night.” A couple of millennia with primarily male company had worn down any reluctance she once had about these matters.

“…we haven’t really discussed anything. And it’s not like we could go all the way. Between my status and our circumstances, getting pregnant is the last thing we want to happen. Don’t know how much that will matter should we reach that point.” She tugged on a stray lock of hair. “But I think… we’ve acknowledged what has always been there between us. We had just hoped that Su-won would have been there too.”

“I don’t know if or when the others will say anything, but…about Queen Cheonsa...” Kaya trailed off, unsure how to phrase it.

“Uncle Yu-hon killed Mother because she wouldn’t let him kill me.” Yona stated. “I think some part of me has always known, but I didn’t want to think about Mother being murdered protecting me again.” Her eyes started watering. “Uncle kills Mother, Father kills Uncle, and Su-won kills Father. Where does the chain of vengeance end? Will our children fight it out thirty years from now, if one of us kills the other?”

She started full on crying, and Kaya could only hug her.

Looking up from his sewing, Yun tried not to cry himself. He may not know anything about her current life, or remembering one’s past life, but still…

“A young girl with an old man’s regrets.” He whispered, clenching the red cloth in his hands.
Yun kept glancing at Yona all through dinner. Finally she said, “You can ask, you know.”

He blushed, not realizing that it had been obvious. Hak and Ik-su were amused by the byplay. “So… did he really come down to found Kouka?” He asked.

“Dragon-me had been curious about humans, and wanted to experience life as a human. He didn’t want to be tempted to use any of his powers, or to stand out a lot, so that’s why he chose to become a human infant.” She explained. “Technically speaking, Kouka already existed, as one of the many small states that existed at the time. Hiryuu Castle is located at what had been the southern-most border. The couple who raised him-me as their own were the rulers of the original Kouka; he was just the one to expand it after their deaths.”

“Did he know any of the dragon warriors before they were picked?”

“Hakuryuu he had known his whole time as a human before then, being his foster brother and son of his nurse. Seiryuu had been a doctor who helped them when they were seeking support. Ryokuryuu had led a group of mercenaries and former slaves who were called upon to help defend the border. And Ouryuu was the eldest of, and caretaker for, a group of orphans living in an abandoned temple. So while he had met all of them previously, Hakuryuu was the only one he knew intimately.” She answered.

“Were the people who tried to kill Hiryuu-ou really after power?” Yun asked, too overcome with curiosity to consider that it might be a sensitive issue.

“…they were so opposed to what he was trying to do, and what he had done with his kindness and gentler touch, that they were willing to do anything and everything for even the slightest chance to kill him. They slaughtered men who surrendered, and used the shock value of depositing hundreds of heads at the gate to breach the walls and capture him. If they had believed in any god, it would have been the gods of discord and destruction. He…he had known people hated him, and hated what he was trying to accomplish, building a kingdom where its people did not have to worry about offending the wrong lord or bandit, but the malice with which they acted…” Her eyes were closed off.

She suddenly stood, leaving her bowl half-finished. “I apologize for wasting food, but I can’t bring myself to eat more.” Bowing to Ik-su and Yun (still shocking Yun with the depth of the bow), she hurried outside.

Yun once again felt like something was trying to kill him with a glare. Hak claimed her unfinished bowl, mostly to try and distract himself from doing something to the kid. Ik-su said nothing, but Yun still shrunk in on himself. Hurriedly finishing, he grabbed his sewing and went out to the storehouse, taking a lamp with him. “You idiot, why’d you ask that?” He scolded himself, examining the seams closely with the lamp.

There was really no avoiding that Princess Yona needed clothes that didn’t look like she’d fallen off a cliff in them. Appearance played a large part in dealing with strangers, and one was less likely to draw suspicion if they didn’t stand out too much.
His pride wouldn’t let him do a poor job, but now it seemed important that he did a perfect job. He didn’t know how to apologize for digging up painful memories from a past life, but maybe he could show his remorse through the clothes.

Yona swallowed hard, feeling her food trying to leave the way it went in. She had always remembered the terror him-her had felt, and the sheer malice of those men, but now she could remember the full horror of the scene.

Men who had placed their faith in him-her, and had faith that some semblance of war protocols would be followed, horribly murdered. The expressions on the heads said they had not died easily. Abi, examining them after everything was over and order was restored in the castle, had revealed the details with great reluctance.

There had hardly been a clean beheading among them. Most had taken several strikes to be beheaded, and those in the group who had placed the greatest truth and faith in him-her, had had their heads sawn off. That group had been the most experienced commanders and soldiers, who had served him-her’s father, and had watched the strange baby their queen had brought home grow into a man with enough determination and stubbornness to attempt to bring a fool’s dream to life—and the force of personality and charisma to pull it off.

The head of Guen’s father had been placed at the top of the pile. He was as much a father as past-father had been, guiding a younger him-her in learning the arts of war.

The widows, children, and grandchildren of the fallen men were supported for the rest of their days. After him-her’s death, Zeno had made sure of it.

She forced herself to take slow, deep breathes, breathing in through her nose and out her mouth. Her rebellious stomach under control, she sprawled out on the ground eagle-spread, staring up at the stars. She lay under the path of the river that separated the Herder and the Weaver.

A water flask dangled in her view, and she followed it up the arm holding it to Hak’s face. “I had to keep the idiot oracle from killing himself cleaning up. The kid went to hide or mope or something.” He explained, sitting down next to her.

“I’ve always remembered what happened, but it’s like my mind couldn’t connect to the horror of it before now.” She tentatively sipped the water, wary of her stomach. “Like when the Fire Tribe soldiers attacked, I could remember what it was like, being in battle, but I still froze, because it wasn’t something I had personally experienced before.”

“He really should have known better.” Hak grumbled.

“Curiosity isn’t a crime, and he seems like the type to seek knowledge. The founder of Kouka pretty much staying at your house? I’d ask questions too. I just…didn’t anticipate my reaction.”

To Hak, it felt like she was trying to make excuses for Yun, but he held his tongue. “How do we know if the dragons will help us? What’s to say that being his reincarnation isn’t enough?” He questioned, turning things back to the reason they were departing in the morning.

“I can feel Ouryuu inside of me. The vow should still matter, but we’ll deal with it if it happens. I need you to teach me the bow and help me learn how to use a sword with how I’m built now. I can’t just sit idly by while people fight for me. I want to be stronger! I have to be stronger…” She dug her nails into her palms. “I do not want to die with the way things are now, because of something I could have avoided by being stronger. I despise the thought of losing you with my whole being. I will face
the gods themselves if I have to, if it meant keeping you alive.”

Surprisingly, Hak didn’t see Hiryuu over her face.

He saw her, breathtaking in her resolve, and couldn’t help but feel a little bit of awe, that this woman—who could have anyone, would chose to keep a clan-less orphan of unknown background at her side, and fight to keep him there.

(Never mind that he had chosen to leave his adopted clan)

He was kissing her before either of them realized that he had moved. He cupped the back of her head as he pulled her closer to him, until she was sitting in his lap, their chests flush. She wrapped her arms around his torso, trying to get closer as their tongues danced with each other. They scarcely broke for air, mostly panting into each other’s mouth when air became necessary and not an option.

Yona felt tingly all over, like when she woke up after her more involved dreams and when she had explored, heat building down low and on her chest. Hak broke off from her mouth and moved to kiss a spot on her neck, high up by her right ear, that he had to remember from being Ha-kun, because he knew the exact way to kiss with a hint of teeth on it, something that had always made Hiryuu’s blood rush and pulse.

There was a hot, pulsating heat where her legs were spread across his lap, and she couldn’t help flushing even more when she realized just what it was. She dug her nails into his shoulders, and the slight hiss against her neck made her shiver and realize it was something he liked. "Hak—"

“…Yes?” He gave her an absolutely wicked look, and had no right to sound as composed as he did.

She moved her hips down to press on the pulsating heat, and was rewarded with a groan. “As much as I’m enjoying this, and we’ll definitely need to do this again, I’d prefer more privacy.”

“You’re the one who had to go and look utterly breathtaking.” He retorted, easing back to lay on the ground, her cradled on his chest.

Her cheeks grew warm again. She was so completely the opposite of everything regarded as breathtaking she found it flattering and impossible in equal measure.

“Not to, y’know, ruin the mood, but what are we? Courting? Promised to each other? Gramps will kill us if we get formally engaged and he wasn’t there.” Hak asked, unable to hold in the question that had been bumping around in his head all day.

“She’d only kill you.” She reminded him. “‘Courting’ doesn’t feel right, since I keep thinking of overly formal occasions where ‘alone’ means only having three other people in the room. ‘Promised’ feels like a better fit. But in all honesty…” She looked up to meet his gaze. “You’re mine, like how Ha-kun was Hiryuu’s and how if you had dragon self, that self would be Hiryuu-kami’s. I know it’s a possessive view, and I tried not to think of you that way, because it wasn’t fair to you and I was afraid of the past overcoming the present—"

He cut her off as his hand caressed the back of her head. “I can’t bring myself to mind, as long as I can possess you as much as you possess me. But you’re right; ‘promised’ feels like the best fit.” He couldn’t help laughing a little. “This is reminding me of when I met you, when I was four and you were one and a half. You dragged me over to that bench and babbled at me, then got frustrated that I couldn’t understand you, and then decided it was time for both of us to take a nap.”

“…I kinda remember that, in the sense of hearing someone talk about.”
“That bench was special.” Hak stated.

Yona smiled. “Very.”

The moment was disturbed when Ik-su approached. “Congratulations on your betrothal.” He told them with a smile.

“It’s not official or anything yet…” Hak said, avoiding his glaze.

“There is something I’d like to ask of the two of you.”

“What is it?” Yona asked, sitting up.

“Tomorrow, when you leave…please take Yun with you.” He requested with a bow.

“Ah, if he keeps sticking his foot in his mouth, the Monkeys will definitely kill him.” Hak said, not willing to admit that he might just kill Yun himself.

“He’s been caught off guard by Yona-hime. Still…he’s too brilliant to waste away in hiding with me. He isn’t meant to be a private treasure, but a public glory.” Ik-su admitted.

“Can you even live more than a day without him?” Hak had to ask, doubtful in Ik-su’s ability to walk three feet without tripping, let alone manage everyday living tasks.

“Oracles are under the protection of the gods, so they can’t get themselves killed through clumsiness or accidents.” Abi commented. “Or in day-to-day life. It’s trickier when it comes to someone actively trying to kill them. It’s a toss-up in that case, depending on how much karma the oracle has. If too much karma is used up, in a short enough time frame, they can in fact be killed. But illness will only take root if it’s curse-directed, and poison falls under the karma situation. Needless to say, once they hit old age, it takes more karma to keep them safe, so they’re like regular people when it comes to old age.”

“Still…” Guen and Shuten weren’t particularly keen on Yun coming with them.

“I can ask, but I won’t force him to come with us.” Yona agreed.

“Wow you *made* these?!” Yona exclaimed the next morning, wearing the clothes Yun had surprised her with; an ivory-colored dress that was more like a dress-length tunic, with red vest, with darker red on the collar and for the sash. A pink sash ribbon completed it.

“I know it’s not silk, but it’s better than what you were wearing…” Yun found himself blushing at her amazement.

“Father went overboard on keeping sharp things away from me after Mother died, so I can’t help being amazed at anyone who can sew. It’s an unusual design!” She gushed, leaving Yun wondering if it was meant as a compliment.

“Do you have anything to trim hair with?” She asked, grabbing the first sharp object she found; an axe.

“You don’t use that!” Sighing, Yun pulled out his scissors and pointed at a short, fat log standing on end. “Can you do anything?” He couldn’t help asking as he began.

“Just reading and writing. I can play the koto, and I rank as a dance master, but that’s not really practical.” She had to admit. “But you’re so talented! Is there anything you can’t do?”
“Stop being pretty.” He deadpanned, eyeing his progress. “Ik-su’s always tripping and hurting himself, so I had to learn medicine. He can cook, but he gets distracted, so it winds up burning. So I had to take over that, otherwise he’d burn the house down or serve charcoal.”

“You’re kind, too.” She fingered her new dress. She could feel the care and effort he had sunk into it, trying to apologize. “Ik-su as well.”

“…you do know all of this isn’t for free.” He couldn’t help pointing out, nearly finished.

Tallying it up in her head, basing it on the fees on what an esteemed doctor would charge, left her wincing. She wasn’t sure what she and Hak would do for money to pay him back, let alone on their journey. “Send the bill to Mundok?” She tentatively proposed, doubting that he’d accept an IOU.

“The Wind Tribe’s great war hero Mundok?! He’d send it right back!” He exclaimed.

“I know he was famous for his actions at the start of Grandfather’s reign, but for as long as I’ve known him he treats every child he meets as a grandchild, and has training up the current Wind Tribe warriors. His appearance hasn’t changed as long as I’ve known him, so frankly, I’m having trouble picturing him as a young man.” She explained. “You know a lot.”

“I am a genius. I can memorize anything I read. Not like I’ve had the chance to read a lot of books…” Finished, he pulled out a battered book. “This can tide me over until I can get more. Ik-su dug through a garbage heap to find it, then ripped it when he tripped. Not sure how he’s survived this long.”

“Oracles are under divine protection, at least when it comes to things like tripping and accidents. It’s not as good for an active threat, but it’s how they can reach old age.” Yona explained.

“I know that to you his talk of gods isn’t fishy at all, but he’s too pure-hearted to be capable of lying.” Yun said fondly. “Shouldn’t you be on your way soon?” He asked as he walked out to go to his favorite reading spot, mostly because he was uncomfortable with the fond look in her eyes.

He had been savoring the book one chapter at a time, to make it last until he could get another one. He’d flip through if he needed to look something up, but for pure reading pleasure he went a chapter at a time. He was still off-balance, between the creepy feelings he’d been getting since saving the Princess and her guard and the Princess in general. “Wonder how the two of them will survive until they find the dragons?” He couldn’t help wondering out loud. “Raiju can hunt, but he’ll be weaker until he’s fully healed, and that’s not much help if they need medicine or safe shelter or new clothes… No clue if the dragons will have any more practical skills.”

He wasn’t sure why he was so concerned with how the pair of them would fare on the road. Not like I have any reason to care, beyond getting paid for everything… but hearing more stories from the mythical era would be payment enough. If I can avoid troubling questions.

Sighing, he walked past the storehouse. “…I know you asked us to take him with us, but I don’t want to break up a family, so I can’t bring him along. Not if he doesn’t want to leave.”

He hovered outside the door, processing what she had said. Ik-su wants me to go with them?

He’d be lying if he said that he’d be content spending his days here until Ik-su could come out of hiding. True, he knew a bunch of practical skills, but it wasn’t like he really had a lot of experiences. Not like the Princess. She could hardly look after herself if she had to survive alone, but she knew more about the state of the country than he did. Word had been that she was the typical silly princess, but she had fooled everyone. She had gotten knowledge of domestic affairs somehow, and when you
add in what she could remember from being Hiryuu-ou…

‘Father went overboard on keeping sharp things away from me after Mother died, so I can’t help being amazed at anyone who can sew.’

He glared at Ik-su as he came outside. “You want me to go where?” He asked with a scowl, pushing him against the wall of the storehouse.

“I want you to go with Yona-hime and Hak-sama. You should go see the world, and not waste away here.” Ik-su brought out the eyes, so Yun knew that he was serious about it.

He could only storm off, passing the princess and a confused-looking Raiju.

He stopped by the river. “He couldn’t have brought it up with me first?” He complained, clenching the book to his chest. “I get him asking if they minded if I came along, but to go behind my back like that?” That was what was pissing him off the most.

*Doesn’t he know that I’ll listen to anything he says, and act on what he tells me?* “He’ll probably say it’s my fate or something.” He told himself.

He knew what he would do.

The goodbyes took so long that the trio didn’t wind up leaving until the next morning, Ik-su marking on a map where one of the Dragon’s Villages was supposed to be.

“Seriously, calm down Hime-san.” Hak commented, watching Yona storm ahead in front of him, her ears red. “Was it having to be a bag of clothes? That I had to handle you roughly so the guy wouldn’t be suspicious? Or that I took the chance to feel you up?”

“Why don’t we just start with all of the above and work our way through the rest of it!” Turning, she lunged at Hak, who avoided by clambering up a tree. “If you’re going to feel me up I wanna feel back!”

Hak was startled enough by her assertion to fall off the tree trunk, and Yun was torn between amusement at the comedy act, bafflement that she was flat out stating something like that, and lingering panic from hoping that the guy wouldn’t notice the ‘clothes’ moving.

In truth, he probably should have expected it, given the embarrassing conversation before departure. “Yun, do you have any rags I could use?” She had asked.

“Huh? What would you need those for?”

“For my cycle.” He could only blink at her, confused. Cycle of what?

With a sigh, she went the direct route. “For when I menstruate.”

His face could have stood in for an apple after she said that. “We’re going to be traveling with up to four more men; I can’t dance around the topic.”

She had a valid point, but she had just been so…blunt about it.

“Hak, I know you say you’re fine, but you were still seriously hurt. It’s better for you to save your strength for if we’re attacked, and not waste it carrying me when I can walk myself.” She said as Hak picked himself off the ground. “Is there a village or town coming up where we can get any last minute supplies? It wouldn’t be a bad idea to get fabric for a change of clothes, if we can afford it.”
She asked Yun.

“Somehow I kept my coin pouch on me during the fight and the fall.” Hak commented, jiggling said pouch. “But what’s most important, supply-wise?”

“We should be able to find game on the road, and any poaching laws wouldn’t cover the smaller animals, at least around Kuuto. I know the tribes each have their own laws, and I imagine Fire would be well picked over, game-wise.” She said. “And there’s probably a bunch of plants that edible.”

“I know the most common ones.” Yun assured them. “I suppose supplies for mending and spare clothes would top the list.”

“Don’t forget you promised to teach me how to fight.” She reminded Hak.

He had been hoping she’d forget a little longer. “We’ll start with the bow after we get supplies.” He demurred, not quite willing to let her have a sword yet, despite the dagger tucked away on her person. “But are you sure? Could you kill someone?”

Yun just looked between them, not willing to interrupt. “…I don’t know.” Yona admitted. “But if I can hold them off long enough to escape…”

“Just remember that by doing this, I’m defying His Majesty’s orders.” The hells would freeze over before Hak ever acknowledged Su-won as king. “Please keep in mind…why he hated weapons.” He said quietly, handing over the bow and quiver.

Yun was vaguely surprised that Yona knew how to blend into a crowd. “I’ve been sneaking out into Kuuto for years. I’d stick to one area, and I’m pretty sure who I was had been an open secret, but I still learned a little.” She explained, somehow managing a bargain at the fabric stall, letting them get enough to make spare outfits for the three of them and still have a little money left over.

Yun and Hak were still uncomfortable from just how well she played a new bride, travelling with her husband and younger brother to meet her new in-laws, and hoping to make a good impression with her new mother-in-law. “It’s always important to get the mother-in-law on your side, otherwise you’ll never have a moment’s peace until her death.” The middle-aged woman selling the fabric agreed. “Not that I plan to make it easy when my son marries, but demonstrating sense in how to cloth the family is a decent start.”

“What?” She blinked at them over the camp fire that night, where they were still a little dazed.

“…the hell has Mistress Sayuri been teaching you?” Hak asked dumbfounded.

“Oh, that wasn’t from her; that was from my informant.” She said with a smile, savoring the meat buns she had charmed from a vendor for the three of them.

“Your informant?” Yun had to ask.

“He’s been traveling the country for several years and reporting back to me on how things are the ground, as it were. He’s spent a lot of time on the road and traveling, so he taught me some things.”

“‘Some things’, she says.” Hak said as he slapped his forehead. “Seriously, the surprises were supposed to stop, you know.”

“How is that surprising?” She asked confused. “You guessing exactly why I’m a girl in this life was more surprising, given the circumstance.”
Hak blushed, him being right in that case had taken on a whole new meaning since realizing who Ha-kun was. He knew the two had been close, but with Yona’s admission the other night, it was a little humbling that past-him/her meant so much to a dragon in human form.

“Why are you a girl in this life?” Yun asked. “It’s safe to ask that, right?”

“His wife and queen didn’t have a very comfortable pregnancy, so she demanded he witness the whole birth, start to end. She got him to promise to be a girl in the next life, so he could feel first-hand what it was like.” She admitted sheepishly, scratching her cheek.

Yun’s brain froze up again. “You didn’t bring him along to break his brain, did you?” Shuten deadpanned. The kid could feel them a little, and they may have had some fun creeping him out, but…

“That’s our job.” Guen pointed out.

“I’ll need to get used to this, won’t I?” He asked Hak. “I mean, I know he was supposedly a dragon in human form…”

“Not really. He was the human self of the Crimson Dragon God. The process he used to descend as he did means that Crimson Dragon God effectively split into two beings, a human self and a dragon self. With me in the picture, there is now a female self in addition to a male self and a dragon self.” Yona explained. “He didn’t keep any powers from when he was a part of the Crimson Dragon God, beyond the fire, and that was only because the fire was him, in a way that could never be erased without destroying him. I always had the spark of the fire inside, but since I was actually born into this world and life, and didn’t descend, it wasn’t lit until recently. Now that it has, much the same applies to me.”

“You seem to have figured things out better.” Hak commented.

“So basically, Hiryuu-ou was a regular person who just happened to have been a dragon?” Yun asked, slightly dubious.

“Pretty much.”

“I’m having trouble reconciling the Hiryuu-ou of the birth myth with the way he really was, the more I hear about the real one.” He admitted.

“Those mentioned in myths were regular people at the time. It’s not like they set out to become myths and legends, so it’s not like they knew what people centuries from now will find the most important. The current text of the birth myth isn’t all that old, so unfortunately, the names of the Dragon Warriors have long been lost.” She said, somewhat mournfully.

Omake (?)

Yona’s First Period

Twelve year old Yona felt miserable. Her belly hurt down low, she felt on the edge of tears, and not even her friend Hak and her cousin (and crush) Su-won, both fifteen, could distract her. “I’ve been like this all morning.” She complained to them. “I felt fine last night!”

“Maybe you should go to the royal doctor.” Su-won suggested. “It wouldn’t due to try and bear it in case it’s something serious.”
Yona, feeling oddly sticky between her legs, reluctantly stood up.

Hak was the one to notice the red stain on the cushion and the back of her skirts. “HIME-SAN YOU’RE BLEEDING!!!!”

General chaos and panic ensued. When King Il and the castle matron arrived a few minutes later, having been alerted by a servant of the chaos, Yona had hidden in her private privy and washroom, while Hak and Su-won were coming up with increasingly outlandish theories behind the bleeding.

The comments from the Three Monkeys, that only Hak (and Yona) could hear, were not helping

“She’d been feeling bad all morning and she stood up and there was blood and I swear we didn’t do anything to make her bleed!” Hak said frantically, Su-won feverishly nodding next to him.

The matron sighed, and gently cajoled Yona into letting her in.

Leaving the King to try and assure the boys the best he could. “I know the two of you did not do anything.” He shifted, a little uncomfortable. “Well, when a girl stops being a girl and becomes a woman, she—“

Yona’s shout cut him off. “WHAT DO YOU MEAN THIS WILL HAPPEN EVERY MONTH!?!?!?”

The boys paled. “Girls can bleed every month and not die?” Hak whispered, slightly nauseous.

True, he’d drawn plenty of, and shed plenty of, blood in training, but the notion that Yona could bleed without a wound every month regardless of if she wanted to or not disturbed him.

Su-won looked near to passing out.

King Il sighed. “Matron, I know it would be highly unconventional and irregular, but perhaps it would be best if we explained things to them as a group. I doubt the boys would become at ease with the situation without assurances that this is perfectly normal from…well, an expert.”

It took several long minutes before Yona felt comfortable enough to shuffle out, the Matron having fetched her clean clothes. Her cheeks were red, and she felt like she had a cushion stuffed between her legs.

She sat down near Hak and Su-won, who stared at her as they tried to determine if she was okay.

With a sigh, the Matron proceeded to explain the Facts of Life to the trio, the King mainly providing male support to the boys and comfort to Yona.

Frankly, he was missing his wife even more now. And the Matron was scary enough, and Yona in enough distress, that he didn’t dare slip out.

After the explanation, and many, many assurances to the boys that yes, Yona was fine (or would be) and that this was a natural occurrence, that the trio were left alone.

Servants, sympathetic to the (now) young woman, had removed the stained cushion, and brought in a hot water bottle and sweets, that experience told them would help soothe her.

They couldn’t look at each other without blushing. The explanation of why Yona was bleeding and would do so every month or so for the foreseeable future had led to an explanation of where babies came from. “I mean, Gramps told me about…that stuff, but he didn’t say anything about girls
bleeding every month.” Hak said with a blush.

“Neither did Ju-do. I guess men don’t usually learn about…things like that.” Su-won mused, intent on memorizing the grain of the wood in the table.

Yona was sprawled on her stomach, laying on the hot water bottle. “I don’t plan on moving more than I have to today, so you might as well have fun for me.” She suggested glumly. “And hopefully keep Kan Tae-Jun away.”

Hak dragged Su-won out before he could ask why she wanted that. “Think about it, most guys never hear about this stuff until they’re married and have girls, if then. We don’t know him that well; should he really learn something so personal about Hime-san?” He hissed in Su-won’s ear as he headed to the archery grounds.

“You’re right.”

Now alone, save for Guen, Abi, and Shuten, Yona couldn’t help glaring at them. “Did you really have to make up all that stuff for Hak to suggest to Su-won?”

Part of the reason she had hidden in the washroom was so she could laugh at how gullible the boys were. The rest of the reason was full-on embarrassment.

“Him-me thought he understood it a little when he learned about it from Ha-kun. He was an idiot.” She said as she let her face hit the pillow. “This is a thousand times worse than he realized.”

Chapter End Notes

No Yun, you’ve just never been around women enough to pick up the euphemism.

Those female readers who have used pads can probably admit to a similar feeling as Yona the first time they wore one. It felt like a tractor trailer to me, but Kouka isn’t advanced enough for the simile.
“Hak I don’t get it. Why can’t I hit anything?” Yona complained after an hour of trying to kill birds with arrows that had minds of their own, given some of the paths they took.

“Hmm…” Hak took the bow, and seconds later there was a bird on the ground dead. “Just do what I did.” He told her.

“But I don’t know what that is.” She said.

“Aiming.”

She just blinked. “I’m not following you.”

“What’s there to follow?” He asked, as confused at what she wasn’t understanding as she was with what he did differently.

“Naturals just can’t get people who aren’t.” Guen commented with a sigh.

Yun, hearing something, eyed the spot to his right. Now he was hearing stuff.

Great, all the bizarre happenings were getting to him and his logical mind. “Remind me not to let you train beginners.” She said as she went to collect the arrows.

“What’s that mean??”

For this latest round, Hak guided her body into the correct position, holding the bow and arrow with her. “You need to use more strength. Draw back firmly, and hold it steady.” With Hak guiding her, another bird was quickly dead. “For now, focus on shooting straight, and staying focused on the target.” He told her.

Yona watched carefully as Yun butchered the birds and prepared the meat. “Can you teach me how to cook? And sew?” She asked. “It’s not going to be fair to you if you’re the one who’s always cooking. Same thing with sewing.”

Yun gave her a slightly dubious look. “Won’t you have enough on your plate with the archery?”

“Not really. And even if I did, it’s still not fair to you. What if you’re sick or hurt? Hak can only go as far as flame-cooking a fish.” She said stubbornly.

“I’d like to see you do better at present.” Hak commented, lounging against a tree.

He refused to admit it out loud, but his chest and shoulder were aching, not only from the task of carrying his weapon, but from the archery as well.

“You can at least make yourself useful and get some water, Raiju.” Yun commanded.

“Fine.” Rolling his eyes, Hak went to do as requested.

“Want me to slip him something to make him rest?” Yun whispered to Yona. “I doubt he’s been
sleeping-sleeping.”

“He won’t be as long as we’re in Fire. Might be better if you have anything that can dull the pain he has to be feeling after the archery. And if it happens to make him sleepy…” She gave Yun a sidelong glance.

“On it.”

Yona curled up carefully against Hak when Yun went to clean up and dispose of the bird remains properly. “I do know what you had Yun add into mine.” He told her.

“The more proper sleep you get, the quicker you’ll heal.” She pointed out. “Not like Abi and the others can’t keep watch.” She laid her head gently against his chest, listening to his heart beat.

“Is my princess commanding me to rest?” He asked with a grin. “Or are you going to take a more direct approach to get me to rest?” He lightly tugged on a lock of hair, careful of pulling too hard on the much shorter hair.

Getting the hint, she lifted her head and met him halfway. Over the last several days the kisses had turned into through examinations of each other’s mouth and tongue, deep and languid. “I hope we can get a chance for privacy soon.” She whispered. “Seiryuu has probably seen enough couples getting down to business without us adding to the list.”

“I know he’s not doing it on purpose if he sees us from wherever he is, but I get your point on unseen eyes. Plus I’d rather it be for my private viewing pleasure.” His voice was husky.

“So do I.” So caught up in each other they didn’t realize when Yun returned.

“Guess the next priority is a tent.” He sighed, only to be ignored.

Yun felt like an intruder when he came across them like this. He’d have pegged them as long-time lovers, just based on how they acted with each other in these moments. Both were adamant that wasn’t the case, and they couldn’t risk it, anyway. Outside these moments, they were anything from long-time friends, to princess and long-suffering bodyguard, to each other’s annoying sibling.

But what never changed was the love he could see in the actions, the lingering glances and touches.

“Hakuryuu is the one with the dragon’s arm, right?” He asked after several minutes, when they had gotten tired of kissing.

Well, Hak had gotten tired as the additive to his food took hold. Yona was still awake.

She nodded. “It can expand at the owner’s command and has the strength of ten men. Or five men and Hak at full strength.”

“I’m not sure how to picture the Dragon Warriors. I keep conjuring up guys like Raiju.” Yun complained.

“It’s not just the right arm that is different for the Hakuryuu.” She said. “The rest of their bodies are altered so they can handle both the strength and the weight of the arm once expanded. It’s not obvious compared to the arm however.”

“Makes sense. I guess even divine power can’t accomplish everything.” He commented. “No point in having the strength of ten men if you can’t lift your own enlarged arm to use it.”
“Ne, Yun?”

“Hmm?”

“Once we reach Hakuryuu village…I don’t plan on saying anything about being Hiryuu’s reincarnation.” She hugged her knees. “I don’t know what stories have been passed down the generations, and it’s not like he rose from the dead to restore the country.”

“…is it that hard at times, keeping track of what’s you and what’s him?” Yun tentatively asked.

“It nothing like before the fire lit, but I’ve spent too long being cautious. Not to mention, for all the similarities, there are important differences, my gender only being the first.” She stared into the dancing flames of the fire, so much like the fire lurking inside. “In the simplest terms, it’s easier to view myself as the inheritor of his legacy. I’m getting better at explaining it as I figure it out myself, but there’s still something going on that I can’t explain yet.”

“So wait and see how Hakuryuu and the village react?” He clarified.

She nodded.

At some point in the wee hours of the morning, Yun found himself awake. Yona was not where she had been, curled up with Raiju.

It didn’t take much looking to find her. She was about ten to fifteen feet away, practicing. Why is she doing that at this hour? He couldn’t help wondering. And how long as she been at it? The light was poor, but the clouds shifted away from the moon long enough for him to see that her fingers tips were red. “That was ten, right?” She said, turning to look at something like she was expecting an answer.

“…en…might…fing…”

He definitely heard something. And it sounded male, so it couldn’t have been the Princess talking to herself. Maybe he wasn’t going crazy. There had to be something that she was interacting with; it might even be the cause of the creepy feelings and someone giving him the evil eye.

He hunkered back down to sleep, suddenly feeling colder than was normal for a night this time of year.

“Your form’s looking better.” He commented the next morning, cooking up the poultry and rice they didn’t eat last night.

“You think so?” She asked. “It was hard to tell, since I can’t look at myself when I’m doing it, but it’s feeling more natural. Do you know anything about archery Yun?”

“Nah, I hunt with traps when I need meat.” He glanced over to Hak, who was still asleep. “He must really be exhausted if he’s still asleep. I didn’t give him that much.”

“I don’t know if it’s better to wake him up to eat while the food’s hot, or to let him sleep.” Yona commented.

“It can go a bit longer cooking without wreaking the taste, so we can let him sleep for now.” He told
her after checking the progress of the meal. “Are you really sure about learning to fight?”

“I don’t have a choice. Either I learn to fight in this life and to potentially kill someone, otherwise I’ll be the one killed.” She pressed her fingers together, wincing slightly. “I know I don’t have the luxury of mercy, with as powerless as I am now.”

“You can’t get anything from him?” He asked.

“He was an expert at swords back then, but he was built more like Hak. Everything is completely different, so what I could get from him isn’t as useful as you’d think.” She gingerly accepted the bowl of food. “When we were attacked, in the cliffs…I just froze. If I hadn’t, Hak would not have been injured by the poisoned arrow. I can only learn what it’s like to face the choice of kill or be killed in an actual life or death fight.”

*Everything Father hated, in this life and the last one…I have to use in order to survive. It’s no longer an outlet for mourning or making his ideals real. Forgive me, Father…*

*To survive, I must disobey you.*

“Well, let’s see if you’ve gotten the hang of it.” Hak said as they grew closer to the location Ik-su had marked on the map. Guen had said they were getting close as well.

“Don’t take too long.” Yun grumbled, going on ahead.

“Yun, wait! We don’t know how they react to strangers, so it’s better if we stick together.” Yona yelled after him.

Realizing she had a point, he sat down on a fallen log.

“Step one: hit this tree.” Hak patted the tree next to him.

An arrow later he was clapping. “I had faith in you!”

Yona gritted her teeth, trying not to let his sarcasm get to her. “Step two: hit me.”

She stared at him horrified. “No way!”

“I can dodge. You need to learn how to aim at a moving target.” He reminded her.

“I’m not kissing it better if I hit you.” She warned as she readied another arrow.

What followed was an excuse in frustration for her and a light workout for him. “STAND STILL DAMNIT!!” She growled.

She had a feeling where this was going, and she didn’t like it.

“Nowhere close to hitting me.” He said after several minutes. “You need to aim like you’re trying to kill me.”

“Of course I don’t want to kill you!” She reminded him, annoyed and slightly horrified he wanted her to do that.

“Then pretend I’m someone trying to kill you.” Hak said simply. “Like a soldier from Fire or the castle. Someone you want to kill.”
“There’s—there’s no one like—“

“Pretend you’re aiming for Su-won.” He suggested, a dark look in his eyes.

To be honest, he hadn’t expected her to draw blood, as her arrow cut his cheek before hitting the tree behind him.

He hated what he had done, but it had been necessary.

Her bangs shadowed her eyes. “I hate it…when you do shit like this.” It was a testament to how frustrated and angry he had made her, earlier and right now, that she cursed. A part of him knew she was referring to an incident long in the past, where Ha-kun had done something similar to Hiryuu.

“But I’ll take up any and every weapon I can to protect you.” She admitted as she started crying. “No matter…no matter who I’d…”

He embraced her, letting her hide her face in his chest as he tucked her head under his chin.

He’d never apologize for pushing her like this, but he’d apologize for the heartbreak he caused.

Still teary-eyed, Yona lifted her head to kiss the scratch she had left on his cheek, licking the blood away. “I thought I told you to use me as a tool for survival.” He murmured into her ear.

“And I thought I told that if you don’t worry about tools, you’ll never know when they’re about to break.” She reminded him, kissing him lightly on the lips before reluctantly drawing away.

Both trios, the trio of the living and the trio of the spirits, shadowed by Zeno and Kaya, were quiet as they continued on their way.

“Where is this mist coming from?” Yun complained a few minutes later. “It’s supposed to be shadowed in mist, but I didn’t expect it to be this literally!”

“We have to be there by now, but there’s nothing…” She commented, directing a suspicious look at Guen.

“It’s not like I could go ahead and let them know you’re coming.” He said, slightly panicked.

Somehow she had gotten more terrifying with the fire lit.

‘Leave…’ A voice—no, several—voices said from the mist. ‘Leave this land at once, or suffer divine punishment…’

“‘Divine punishment’, huh?” Hak chuckled darkly. “So you’re some god that hides in mist?” With a powerful swing of his guandao, he cleared the mist to reveal over two dozen archers, all aiming for them.

Yun backed into Hak’s back as Hak pulled Yona close, to shield her from at least some of the arrows. “So you’re of the Dragon’s Village?” Hak half asked, half demanded.

“If you know that much, all the more reason for you to not leave here alive.” A middle-aged (?) man who seemed to be the leader replied.

As his eyes took in the trio, they widened as they caught sight of Yona’s hair. “Crimson hair…?”

His observation rippled through the others, to be added with, “A girl…”
Leaping down to their level, the leader of the archers went down on one knee and asked, “Where do you hail from, crimson-haired young lady?”

“The Land of Wind. The oracle in hiding there instructed me to visit the Four Dragon Warriors. Are you one of them?” She replied calmly, already knowing the current Hakuryuu was not present.

“An oracle?” The archers whispered among themselves.

“No. We are but the guardians of Hakuryuu. Please, permit us to escort you and your companions to Hakuryuu Village.” The leader said deferentially.

Hak found himself carrying Yona after they entered the village, mostly because the villagers were crowding around, marveling at her hair. “Crimson hair, for real?!”

“So beautiful!”

Yona couldn’t help her blush.

“It is an unusual color.” Yun remarked. “Do you worship crimson hair here?”

“The first Hakuryuu served a master with crimson hair. Moreover, an oracle sent you to us.” The leader of the archers, who said his name was Ku-jan, said. “You, in fact, may be the one we have been waiting for, for countless generations.”

“I think your clan took the devotion to our idiot king a little too far.” Shuten said, with a sweat drop.

“Or you might not.” Ku-jan added, making Yun droop. “And if she’s not?”

“……I will take you to Hakuryuu-sama…” Ku-jan declared, avoiding the question.

“Ne, Raiju, you’ll keep me safe, right? RIGHT?” Yun tugged Hak’s sleeve nervously.

“Well I do like good food…” Hak pondered, not overly concerned. The Monkeys did not seem to be concerned and, more importantly, Yona wasn’t concerned either.

When it came to the Dragons, he had little choice but to follow her lead with them.

“Wait, aren’t all of you descendants of the first Hakuryuu?” Yun asked. “What makes ‘Hakuryuu-sama’ special?”

“All of us are descendants of the first Hakuryuu, true enough.” Ku-jan confirmed. “But each generation, only one among us is born with the power of Hakuryuu: the dragon’s arm.”

Village Elder Ki-mei, or Baa-Baa as the village called her, considered the news and the outsiders as she went to wake her great-grandson, the current Hakuryuu. This was not the first time a person with ‘crimson’ hair had come to the village. Each time before then, the person had some shade of brown hair that looked red in the light, or crude dye jobs.

Not this girl.

Not only did she break the pattern by being a young girl, the way her hair sparkled in the sun was too beautiful and radiant to be hair dyes. Her eyebrows matched her hair (something past imposters did not account for), but, more importantly for her, her eyes looked far too old for a girl of her physical age.
While the tales always mentioned Hiryuu-ou’s hair color, only the one passed down from Village Elder to Village Elder remembered his eyes; a gentle purple that called to mind wisteria.

She couldn’t help reminding her great-grandson of how he had not yet married. It was important for the Hakuryuu to sire children. Not only were the chances of the next one being the son of his predecessor higher, the dragons’ blessing helped ward off problems from being interrelated so. Those of the clan who made their way in the outside world would sometimes bring back babies, either their own or ones with no more family to claim them, but each Hakuryuu having at least one child, even if that child was their successor, was a far greater help.

She couldn’t help being a little taken aback by his reaction to how outsiders had been permitted in. It reminded her that for all they protected the Hakuryuu, he still felt the burden of protecting them any way he could, without a master to serve and protect.

She left out the most important fact about the girl from outside the village; her crimson hair. Legends said that when Hakuryuu would meet his master, the blood would boil and the bond would form anew. It was far better for him to go in ‘blind’, as it were, then to go in with an expectation that might not be met.

Gesturing to her attendants, she directed them to follow him.

“Hak there is no getting out of teaching me the sword.” Yona reminded him as they sat under the huge tree in the center of the village, having pulled up her hood to get the villagers to stop fawning.

“Why don’t you actually kill someone with a bow before we move onto to close combat?” He suggested.

Standing, she placed her hands on her hips. “I’m holding you to that. That goes double if Hakuryuu does not come with us. I will not force anyone to do something they are so opposed to.”

“You there!”

She turned to the voice, her hood falling as she did.

It was a young man with features more delicate compared to Guen, but the same hair and, most strikingly for her, the same eyes.

They were always children in their snowy field, but she knew instantly who he was.

Kija felt his breath catch in his throat as she turned to look at him, revealing crimson hair framing violet eyes and a youthful face.

*Crimson hair…*

Yona pressed her hand to her heart in the same moment that Kija grabbed his arm as it expanded without his command. The ghosts saw what the mortal world could not, as the ancient blood pact was renewed between the inheritors of the legacy. When it ended, Kija passed out. “I’d call him a wimp, but even I know all the predecessors clinging to him are responsible for the backlash.” Shuten commented, disappointed he couldn’t mock Guen.

“I underestimated the spiritual burden; his arm’s burned!” Guen exclaimed, utterly shocked as Yun and the villagers moved to assist Kija.

“Guen…what the hell did you tell your successor for all that longing to develop?” Abi asked flatly,
eyeing the charred marks on Kija’s dragon arm.

“I don’t know! All this longing didn’t start until my fifth successor, so I don’t know where it all came from!” Guen protested, trying to dislodge one of his successor’s spirits from the mass clinging to Kija.

Yona couldn’t help rubbing her heart. She could feel Hakuryuu, a warm ball of fur sliding next to the sun. “Is he alright?” She asked, eyeing the burned dragon’s arm.

There were so many past Hakuryuu clinging to him and the dragon’s arm, she could hardly see his own soul.

Groaning, Kija opened his eyes, to see his master kneeling besides him. “Ah… Hakuryuu?” She asked.

“Yes. I am the one who carries the power of Hakuryuu.” He bowed low. “I have been waiting for you, my master.”

She stood, dumbfounded as the villagers followed his lead and bowed to her. Hakuryuu was practically sparkling as he looked at her. “Congratulations, Hakuryuu-sama!” Ku-jan cried. “Our king is here at last!”

“All the centuries of protecting the bloodline of Hakuryuu has been fulfilled!” Another villager exclaimed, everyone pumping a fist in the air.

“Yep; these are totally your descendants.” Abi said dryly. “No one else could be this emotional.”

“HEY!!” Guen yelled, offended on behalf of his clan.

Even though Abi was completely right.

“Talk about happy.” Yun said as he took in the display.

“’King’?” Yona blinked. “Did they recognize me?”

“Maybe it’s because of your hair, so they think you’re Hiryuu-ou.” Hak proposed, having overheard Yona and Yun’s conversation about how she wasn’t planning on saying anything about her being Hiryuu’s reincarnation.

“I’m not of his line though. The royal family has changed so many times, that all of Hiryuu-ou’s descendants are probably dead.” She commented, fingering her hair.

It wasn’t quite true, there were still descendants alive today, but the connection was so distant as to be meaningless.

“My master,” Her attention returned to Kija. “What is your name?”

“Yona.”

“Yona-sama…” He whispered to himself, as she took in his appearance.

He was much prettier than Guen, the effects of being born with the dragon’s blood more apparent. “You’re beautiful.” She told him honestly.

“Ah, you are far more radiant than I am.” He protested, as much as one could while staying deferential.
She blushed a little, before growing serious. “Hakuryuu.”

Kija looked up at Yona, whose eyes seemed to age before him. “I cannot claim to have come for you for any grand reason, no matter what the stories handed down through your village may say. My only goal is for myself and my companions to survive, and I’m selfish enough and stubborn enough to seek out any power that will help me reach that goal, even that of the gods. If such a reason is so incompatible with the expectations passed down to you, tell me, and I’ll leave you alone.”

Kija opened his mouth to protest, but stopped at Yona’s raised hand. “Your power is yours and yours alone. I do not want to force any of the dragons to disregard their personal feelings, especially if those are at odds with my own goals. Your ancestor had a choice in accepting the offer of the Dragon Gods, and I do not want to deprive you of the chance of deciding your own fate.”

He could see her point, somewhat. “My blood is telling me that you are my master, and that is something I fully accept.” He answered. “Thus, your goals are my goals.”

“At least he’s honest.” Shuten assured Guen, who had face-palmed at how into his destiny Kija was. “Nothing wrong with that.”

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, I've compared Kija to a tribble
“That was a lot easier than I thought it would be.” Yun said as he sat with Yona under the huge tree in the village center, watching the villagers prepare for a feast celebrating the arrival of Hakuryuu’s master.

“They’ve kept a positive view of the dragon’s power. Still, I wasn’t expecting what did happen.” Yona replied.

“What do you mean?”

“…I can *feel* Hakuryuu inside of me, like a warm ball of fur. At the same time he underwent the awakening.” She elaborated.

“‘Awakening’?” He asked, curious as to what she meant.

“It’s one thing to bear the power of the dragons; it’s another thing entirely to use that power in service of a master. It didn’t matter, the first time, because of the immediacy of the situation. Even if my dragon brothers had pretty much killed the core group responsible for the event calling them down in the first place.” She whispered, not wishing to draw attention. “This time, there was no idea when I’d be able to go find my dragons, or even if I’d be able to, so there was no guarantee the current generation would have been the ones. There is a boost in power, and they’ll be able to feel me, after the awakening. I just didn’t expect it to go both ways this time.”

“So you can feel Hakuryuu right now?” His mind whirled with ways they could test this, to see how far it went.

“I can’t tell distance or where he is, since it’s a feeling inside of me, but I can feel what he’s feeling, like an echo.” Her brow furrowed. “He’s reminding me of a cat trying to make itself look larger, with its fur standing on end. Someone irritated him…?”

The answer came as soon as she finished the question.

“Oh boy, they’re already not getting along.” Yun pointed out as Kija and Hak stomped back. He could almost see an actual white dragon and an actual Raiju getting ready to fight over their heads.

Only the Raiju kept flickering to a dark dragon and back.

“What’s wrong?” She asked the pair.

“He’s no good, Hime-san. We’re better off leaving him here.” Hak said.

“You’re the one who should be leaving!” Kija exclaimed. “I can protect Hime-sama well enough on my own.”

“Like a sheltered rich kid like you even knows how to fight, let alone survive in the real world.” Hak snarked.

“Hime-sama, why is such an uncouth person your bodyguard?!” Kija couldn’t believe anyone could be as uncouth as the man he found himself dealing with.

“Here’s hoping that he never sees you, Guen.” Abi deadpanned.

“OI!”
“So what exactly happened?” Yun asked, confused as to why they were fighting over which one of them should protect Yona.

“Eh, Hakuryuu gave me a bag of money and told me to get lost.” Hak told Yun.

“…why is your stomach bulging?” He glared suspiciously at said bulge.

“Maybe I’m gaining weight.” Hak dodged the question.

“As one of the Four Dragon Warriors it is my role to protect her!” Kija argued hotly. “You’re not one of us, so it should be you who leaves!”

“NO!” Yona exclaimed as she grabbed Hak’s arm.

“Oh boy…” Guen, Abi, and Shuten sighed, remembering the last time someone tried taking Hak away from her.

(From the outskirts of the village, Zeno found himself wishing he had already joined up with Yona, if only so he could watch the fireworks. It had to be good if she was getting this worked up.)

“He’s a childhood friend. Without him, I’d have never gotten out of the castle, let alone all the way here, safely. He’s mine, and his presence is not to be questioned.” She didn’t bother trying to dampen the fire; what they had in this life was too new, and he was the only one left.

Maybe she shouldn’t have phrased it the way she had, but it was too late to take it back.

After all, it was true, and there was little reason to try and say it in a less possessive way.

The torch Kija had been feeling inside ever since meeting her eyes flared bright into a bonfire, and he couldn’t help being taken aback at her vehemence. At least until Hak started laughing, sounding impossibly evil and creepy.

“Hak, if you don’t stop the creepy laughter, I’m not kissing you anymore.” Yona said flatly.

Knowing who exactly was in charge, Hak stopped.

“You’re lovers?!” Kija half-asked, half-yelled.

“Not really. We can’t be lovers if all we’ve done so far is kiss.” Yona said matter-of-factly.

Hak counted it as a victory when Kija turned bright red. With how fierce his blush was, his hair almost looked pink.

“If sticking your tongue down each other’s throat is kissing.” Shuten grumbled. He was slowly getting better, but it was a long process.

“See? Nothing to be done about it.” Hak commented, while Yona stole his extra weight to give back.

“In fact,” She began. “If things continue as they are, Hak will be killed while protecting me. So please, protect him as you would me, so he won’t be killed.” She asked, toning down the fire and possessiveness to make a polite request instead of an order.

“Oh! You want me to keep him safe because he’s weak?” Kija jumped to a Wrong Idea.

Guen face-palmed again while Shuten started cackling.
“I haven’t sunk so low as to have to be saved by some white snake!” Hak growled in protest, in equal measure as being taken for weak as the implication he needed saving.

“’White Snake’?” Kija yelled, revealing he had inherited the hot-headedness of Guen. “How dare you compare the Holy Dragon to a snake!!”

“This is gonna be a long trip if they’re going to be at each other’s throats the whole time.” Yun observed, surprised neither had broken down and tried drawing blood.

Yona could only nod. Hakuryuu had clearly never encountered anyone who was so dismissive of the dragon’s power, being sheltered here in Hakuryuu village. She could tell that even without feeling him inside. Hak, on the other hand, was too proud to admit that having another (trained) fighter at his back was a good idea, and insulted to have been handed a bag of money and dismissed by a sheltered pretty boy.

He was also insulted at the thought of needing to be saved, but she’d rather have him pissed off and alive, than content and dead.

True, giving the money back may have been foolish, but it would stay a bone of contention if they kept it.

Thankfully, preparations for the feast had progressed to the point of a banquet area being set up in the area where they were gathered, and stopped any impending fight.

Yona still made sure to sit with Hak on her right, with Hakuryuu on her left.

It was a delicate decision, showing respect for Hakuryuu and the position of the Dragon Warriors, while subtly stating that Hak was not someone to be casually dismissed. She couldn’t have them sitting next to each other or a fight would break out, and placing Yun between herself and either of them would have been insulting. She had Yun sit to Hakuryuu’s left, where if she was seated on a throne, the Minister of the Left would have stood, the most trusted and (usually) senior advisor of the King.

In life, Guen had come to be called the Right Hand of the King, but she barely knew his descendant. It didn’t feel appropriate to place an unknown factor over a trusted one.

Heavens above, and him-her had thought balancing the egos of the budding Tribes was hard. That was nothing compared to the male rivalry in the works currently.

Not that anyone but Hak and the Village Elder seemed to notice or care. The Elder had given her a slight nod, understanding the message.

Hakuryuu was important and respected, but the bond was too new to be granted precedence.

Hak’s face had been mostly bland, but his eyes told her he got the message too.

The moon was high in the sky as the feast ended, and they were escorted to where they would spend the night by the Elder and her attendants.

With Hak and Yun in appropriately respectful quarters and Hakuryuu in his own room, Yona was
being led to hers’ when she had the chance to make a private request.

“Ah, Elder…” Yona began.

“Please, call me Baa-Baa, everyone does.” The old lady assured her. “Is there something you require, Yona-sama?” She asked.

“Could…could you take me to the tombs of the previous Hakuryuu? It doesn’t seem right, to leave tomorrow without paying my respects.” She asked.

“Of course.” With a gesture, her platform was lifted again, and she led Yona to a spot near the edge of the village, carved out of the mountain itself.

“All of the Hakuryuu are entombed here, all the way back to the first. We carve out more room as necessary.” The elder explained, beckoning her attendants to set her down some distance away, leading Yona the remaining few feet on foot.

“Wow…this is impressive…” Yona admired, taking in the building that was almost growing out of the mountain.

Yona dropped to her knees. Ignoring the elder’s gasp, she bowed low, as low as Hakuryuu and the villagers had when acknowledging her.

“I am sorry…that I did not come sooner. I cannot begin to comprehend the burden of longing, of fulfilling the purpose engraved in your blood…and the anguish when your successor is born, knowing it will go unfulfilled for another generation. I could not possibly dream of expressing my sorrow at bearing such a fate.

“Yet, in the same token…I cannot begin to express my gratitude towards you. For all the generations of longing…for all the generations of anguish…so please, rest easy now. Your successor has taken up all of your burdens, all of your desires. May you find satisfaction in his service to me, above the skies. I…am not the only one who wishes to express sorrow and gratitude in equal measure to all of you.”

Yona raised up from the low bow, cupping her hands before her while keeping her head down. “I wish…I could thank you all by name…in my own name. I can only offer this. Hiryuu…offers his deepest apologies and gratitude to those who have born the name and power of Hakuryuu. Your strength…has shouldered burdens that would make even the gods falter and crumble.”

The elder gasped as the glowing white mass that had slowly built throughout Yona’s speech suddenly massively expanded, before refining into individual forms. She picked out her husband, son, and grandson before the mass shifted and obscured them from her view. Her grandson, Kija’s father, went down on one knee and bowed his head in acknowledgement of Yona’s words, to be replaced by his father, then his father’s father, by each predecessor faster than the eye could track.

Finally, there was only one white figure standing before Yona. He too knelt and paid homage to her words, before leaning forward and placing a gentle kiss on Yona’s forehead before fading away.

Somehow Yona caught herself on her hands as she fell forward, panting and her face dripping sweat. “I knew anguish and longing had built up over the centuries…but I didn’t realize just how much there was…”

“You needn’t have done that, Hiryuu-sama.” Ki-mei told her, handing over a water flask one of her attendants kept on her person.
“The very fact that I needn’t have done so makes all the more important that I did do it.” She replied. “And please don’t call me Hiryuu. I am his reincarnation, not him returned from the dead.”

“I had thought so.” The elder murmured. “Perhaps a quick bath before you retire for the night?”

“That would be lovely.” Yona agreed as she stood, bowing the appropriate depth to the Elder.

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Elder Ki-mei couldn’t help reflecting on what she had witnessed with Yona-sama at the Tomb of Hakuryuu. The ancestors clinging to her great-grandson had been reduced by at least half, just from an acknowledgement of their unfulfilled waiting! Let alone the apology and gratitude. “You may be adamant that you are only his reincarnation, but your actions seem to tell me otherwise, Yona-sama.”

The reincarnation of Hiryuu-ou-sama had fallen asleep as soon as she had gotten horizontal, and she found herself tucking her in the way she had her great-grandson when he was small.

With her eyes closed, the fact that she was barely sixteen stood out so much.

Taking one last look at the sleeping girl, Ki-mei departed for her own bed.

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Slowly waking up, Kija found himself staring at his right hand. “It’s strange…it feels lighter, somehow…”

*I guess the ancestors are as pleased with Yona-sama’s arrival as the village and myself are…*

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Guen sighed as he listened and watched Hak and the current Hakuryuu, Kija, ‘subtly’ insult each other.

Yona completely agreed. It might have been funny if she wasn’t in the middle of it.

Fed up, she hit both of them on the chin. “Settle down!”

She had to lay out ground rules for an eighteen year old and a twenty year old.

The budding Tribes had been so much easier. “Look, we’re going to be traveling together for the foreseeable future, so it would be for the best if the two of you were at least civil with each other.” She scolded the pair of boys.

Kija looked down and muttered apologies. Hak was utterly unrepentant.

“Hak! Kija has never left his village before and he’s nervous, so go easy on him.” She pointed a finger at Hak.

“Kija!” She cut off his attempt to deny his nerves. “Hak loves teasing people. It’s his hobby, so don’t take any of it personally.”

“‘Hobby’?” Hak repeated with a face. What he did was far more than just a ‘hobby’.

“So you can feel where the other dragons are, right?” Yun asked Kija, map in hand. “Where’s the closest one?”

Kija closed his eyes and felt for his dragon brothers. “Seiryuu is…that way.” He finally said, pointing east.
“That’s not very helpful.” Yun complained.

“Don’t worry I can lead you right to him.” Kija assured him, taking the lead.

“This isn’t going to end well…” Abi commented.

Guen just started banging his head against a tree when Kija slid down into a hole and encountered bugs for the first time, Shuten cackling like crazy.

Yun frowned off to the side. *I hear someone banging their head on a tree and someone else… cackling? Is it whomever Ohime-sama had been talking to the other night?*

Yona wished she could join Guen when she saw the look of unholy glee in Hak’s eyes over such an exploitable fear.

“So dragons can’t even handle some bugs?” Hak questioned as Kija hauled himself out of the hole, dirty.

“I don’t LIKE creepy crawling squishy things! My power was bestowed by Hakuryuu-kami! It’s far beyond mere mortals!” Kija retorted, offended.

“Good for you.” Hak deadpanned. “Like I’m gonna trust some old musty power.”

“You care to test it right now?!”

The impending fight was tabled when both Hak and Kija reacted to something. “Hime-san, go hide.” Hak ordered quietly.

“Can you tell who’s coming?” Yun frantically asked.

“There’s a lot of unrefined footsteps.” Kija answered.

“Guess your successor isn’t so useless!” Shuten commented with a smirk.

Guen’s punch sent him flying, Guen chasing after to continue beating him up. Sighing, Abi got ready to do what little he could.

“Hak! Can I use the bow?” Yona asked, raising her hand high like she was in the school room.

“Sensei does not approve. Go hide.” Pouting, Yona still grabbed Hak’s bag and did as ordered, Yun following her into the bushes.

“At least they taught him how to use the Dragon’s Arm, even if the spirits clinging to him are over-eager about protecting their master.” Abi commented later, when camp was set up and Yun set about preparing dinner.

“Hopefully this will help reduce them more.” Guen hoped with a sigh, as Kija stared at his meal in confusion. “Hime-sama, how can you be okay with food like this?”

“Oi kid, never insult the cook in charge of your food.” Shuten scolded, even though Kija couldn’t hear him.

“I can’t afford to be picky, Kija. This is nothing compared to what was served when an ambassador from the Kai Empire came; they fixed some of their dishes. You’re… better off not knowing some of the things they eat. Hak can only flame cook fish, so…” Yona explained, finishing her portion.
“You’re in no position to insult my food when you can’t do better.” Hak suddenly said, finally awake.

“How are you feeling? Any pain from your injuries?” She asked, kneeling besides him.

“What injuries?”

“Anyway, are you hungry?” She mentally rolled her eyes at his denial of his injuries. Any other man would not have been able to fight as well as Hak with the injuries he had suffered. “Open wide!” She said with a smile, holding a spoonful of dinner up.

Suddenly the spoon was in Kija’s hand. “Let me handle such a menial thing!”

“OI! Don’t interrupt the moment!” Hak complained with a glare, stealing the spoon to feed himself.

“How dare you try and make Hime-sama feed you?!”

“Calm down Kija. When you get injured I can feed you too.” Yona assured him with a deceptively innocent face.

Kija’s face attempted to mimic her hair, but it just made him look pink again, to Hak’s unspoken glee. “Now that we’ve eaten…” Yun pulled out the map, wondering how much lower the collective sanity of the group would slip.

He was getting seriously outnumbered here. “You feel him off to the east-northeast?” At Kija’s nod he continued. “Factoring in the merchant routes, the nobles’ country estates, and the towns, there are six unremarkable, unpopulated areas the village could be.”

“We can’t rule out the mountains.” Yona said as she examined the area Yun had traced out with his finger on the map. “One dragon village had thought it was a good idea, so…”

“Seiryuu Village had been in the land of Earth, but according to my village’s spies, one day fourteen years ago the whole village just vanished. I can clearly feel Seiryuu, so the whole clan must have moved their village for some reason.” Kija commented.

“I remember Ik-su telling me a story of ruins in the mountains, where people would flee to hide out from bandits and armies. He was fuzzy on the exact location, but if we check the other spots and can’t find him, it’s worth checking out. I just hope the clan didn’t cross the border.” Yun agreed with a frown.

“Wow Yun you know everything!” Yona couldn’t help patting him on the head. His depth of knowledge reminded her so much of Yun-mei, Guen’s second younger sister. Him-her had scandalized a fair amount of people when she had been named an advisor, but no one could protest after she had buried them in her knowledge.

“I’m only a year younger than you, so don’t treat me like a little kid.” Yun complained, but his blush said otherwise. “Alright we’ll start the search for Seiryuu tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good ni—wait we’re sleeping here?!” Before Kija realized it, the other three had fallen asleep.

Yona was practically laying on Hak, with Yun curled up next to them. He could understand the practical necessity of sharing body heat, but it still seemed somewhat inappropriate.

He didn’t, however, miss how the pair clung to each other in their sleep. *I know he is a capable fighter for a regular human and a childhood friend of Hime-sama…but I’m still jealous of how close they are. Kija admitted to himself. Will I someday have such an intimate relationship with her? Well,*
maybe not intimate in the same way, even if…

He was jolted from his thoughts by an unfamiliar noise, reminding him that he was out in the woods in the middle of nowhere, with nothing between him and all the creepy things he hadn’t known existed.

Shuten, Zeno, and Kaya had far, far too much fun making noises at random intervals to freak Kija out.

Guen couldn’t bring himself to protest. Abi had apparently set himself above the whole thing, but couldn’t avoid looking suspicious when Kija started shivering.
He glared at his current enemy: the floor. Well, not so much the floor as being stuck on the floor, on his front, unable to move off of his belly.

Fourteen suns had risen since he descended, and life as a human infant continued to surprise him. The aching gums continued, only soothed by gnawing on the pendant his yellow brother had given him, or his nurse Yun-an or his mother Cheonsa sticking a finger in his mouth, rubbing on the gums.

Most of his time was with one or both of them, Guen and his little sister An alongside. An nursed with him, while Guen did his part to entertain the young Hiryuu. His father Il had occasionally taken him along to his office or a meeting of some sort, drawing stares as people were confused at the sight of a man in his position wearing a baby sling.

His parents were the rulers of a small state near the center of the peninsula he and his brothers watched over. Somehow they managed mostly peaceful relations with their neighbors, and had little trouble obtaining supplies from ports.

Listening to the whispers that followed behind Il when he was with him, he learned that Il was taken as something of a fool. First for insisting on peaceful options whenever possible. Second, for not only remaining completely faithful to one wife, but to a barren wife at that.

Hiryuu had tugged on his father’s headdress when they were alone in his office after hearing those. “The whispers?” Il asked. He enjoyed how they didn’t treat him as dumb just because he was an infant, even if they did tend to pitch their voices higher when speaking directly to him.

He nodded. “Before I married your mother, I hardly kept to one woman more than two nights. It was not unusual to do so, but practically expected for a man in my position. I cannot explain it, but something about the wedding night with her made my heart latch onto her. I lost any joy I had once found in various women. After her second miscarriage, when she begged me through tears to let her raise any child of my loins…I knew how much it would hurt her for me to accomplish with another woman what I could not with her, and I could not bring myself to do so. Last year she bore a live baby, a girl we named Yona. But she was so very weak. We lost her four months ago.” Il’s eyes were wet, and he tried to reach out and comfort him, only to smack him in the face.

Il did not take offense, briefly smiling. “I am alright, although dreams of what could have been are haunting. After Yona’s death, your mother begged me again to look elsewhere, to set her aside like so many others would have after the first miscarriage, and seek happiness in another who could do what she could not. Her health makes another pregnancy too dangerous to attempt, after Yona’s birth nearly killed her. But I could not hurt her in that way. She has supported me through what many have called my foolish dreams of peace without speaking against them. I know how foolish I am, to put personal happiness over my duty to continue my line, but I can’t bring myself to care.” Il smiled fondly as he ran his fingers through brilliant red hair. “But now you are our son, and soon they will call me foolish for taking in a strange baby of unknown parentage. They put so much precedence on blood ties that they ignore the ties of the heart.”

Looking deep, he saw that the problem was not in either of his parents, but in them together. They were a couple who just could not have children together, whose physical natures made healthy children between them a miracle. They were soul mates regardless, and he found himself admiring his father’s strength in defying common practice and expectation.

Returning to the present, Hiryuu pushed himself up on his hands yet again. Each time before he had
fallen on his face, but he was too stubborn to remain in that position.

Tilting to the side, he blinked as he found himself staring into Cheonsa’s eyes, now on his back. She beamed at him. “Good job my little dragon.” She whispered, slightly teary-eyed, and he waved his arms in celebration before reaching for her.

Picking him up, she went to show off his new skill to his father.

He frowned in concentration as he stared across the room, clinging to an arm rest. The stuffed dragon that was his favorite toy was on the other side, and he knew he could get it himself.

Once he could bring himself to let go.

Frowning, he let go, and started to take steps. Walking on two legs was harder than he thought. Humans made it look so easy! It felt like he was constantly in danger of falling.

A few times, he found himself on his behind, but he hauled himself back up on two legs with a scowl and continued.

He found himself sitting again, but his dragon was in reach, so he just reached out for it instead of trying to get up again. He started when he heard clapping, and he realized Cheonsa, Yun-an, Guen, and Il had all been watching. An had ignored the proceedings in favor of trying to pull her sash off. He beamed at them, proud to have done such a hard thing as walking on two legs, and crawled over to them, too tired to try and walk over to them.

Time passed, and soon he was the size and age Guen was when they met. He loved following Guen when he went to learn how to fight with his father, so one day he could guard Hiryuu the way his father, Mun, guarded Il.

But he was worried about An. She had never been able to run as much as he and Guen could, and many times when she tried to run, she started coughing and had to sit down, struggling to breathe. Soon it seemed like those times when she couldn’t breathe grew closer and closer together, and he gave up following Guen to stay with her, playing with her dolls and telling her stories about his dragon brothers. Sometimes he could feel them watching, but he never saw them, which was strange, since he could see spirits and ghosts.

An was four when, one day in winter, she had another spell of being unable to breathe, only it didn’t pass. Despite the efforts of her mother, and prayers by her father and brother, she was dead by nightfall.

He could see her watching them as they mourned over her small body, confused by what had happened, but soon the Piper came to lead her to Heaven, and she was too happy to be able to run with other children as much as she wanted to be sad or confused.

“What’s the point in praying to the gods for help if they can’t hear us?!” Guen raged one day after An’s funeral, practicing his punches out in the snow.

Hiryuu, bundled up on a bench watching, frowned as he considered the gift of his yellow brother. “It’s not that they can’t hear you, but that they don’t know they should be listening.” His eyes smarted from the cold and budding tears.

Guen looked over to him with a frown. He may have only been four and a half when Hiryuu had arrived at the castle, but he knew what everyone whispered about his foster brother; that he carried
the mark of the dragon gods. He also knew his Queen had found him on her way back from the Shrine of the Crimson Dragon God. “…where Cheonsa-sama found you, on the road from the Crimson Dragon God’s shrine…was it on purpose?” He asked.

Clutching his pendant to his chest, he began to cry. “No. I wish it had been, but I didn’t know to listen!”

Guen eyed the sobbing, human self of the Crimson Dragon God. Everyone said it was foolish to think that he had once been a dragon god, but experience told him otherwise. Sighing, he hustled Hiryuu inside, and huddled with him in his bed under the covers, as he cried on his chest. “I shouldn’t be sad, because the Piper came for her and she can run and play the way she wanted, but I miss her! And I’m reminded of how little attention the Heavens pay to Earth. Human lives are blinks of their eyes, and the few times they pay attention are enough to kindle hope despite it all. The shrine had been there centuries, but I never knew about it! How many women went there in vain? How many did Chance favor with a child after their visit, so that others would keep coming in vain?”

Guen let Hiryuu cry himself to sleep. “I promised to protect you, but I can’t protect you from things beyond anyone’s control.” He whispered, wiping the tears off his face. “You shouldn’t blame yourself for things you didn’t know about.”

It was his first experience with Death, and his next would come far too soon.

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He was six, and he was mostly asleep as his mother carried him into his room and got him ready for bed. Yun-an had just given birth to a baby girl, Yun-mei, so she was still recovering and bonding with her.

An unknown time after she had left, he jolted awake. He couldn’t figure out why. Slipping from his bed, he crept to the door, which was open a crack. He couldn’t see much through the small crack in the dark, but there were sounds of a struggle. There was a crash, and the sound of someone running, the footsteps growing fainter.

Pushing the door open, Hiryuu’s eyes widened as he saw his mother on the floor, a growing pool of blood around her as she bled from her belly. “Hi…ryuu…” She murmured as he knelt by her, grabbing her hand.

There was so much blood, and he could see her Spark grow dimmer and dimmer. “I’m sorry… I can’t…” She cried as she reached for him, pulling his head to her chest.

“Mother…” He whimpered, beginning to cry. “In the next life, I’ll be yours and Father’s for real, by blood as well as by heart.”

There was a tug on his dragon self as his Vow took hold. It could be hundreds of years before Cheonsa and Il were reincarnated together and were married in that future life, but when they did, he would be their child again, in both blood and heart.

“Thank you…” She whispered, her Spark so dim as to be an illusion. “…I know it was Chance, but thank you, for becoming mine…”

He sobbed as her Spark went out. There was a sense of disconnect, as a part of his dragon self departed, carrying her up to Heaven.

His father was soon there, finding his wife dead and their son clinging to her. Once he realized he was there, he latched onto Il, heedless of the blood.
The killer was an agent hired by a cousin of Il, one whose hopes of inheriting were dashed by his arrival. Disregarding the oracle who warned against such a course, he sent a man to kill Hiryuu.

He had tried poison, but his fire had burned it out, leaving him too tired to do anything. The wounds his mother had inflicted on the agent were enough to mark him as the culprit. For once, Il had no problem ordering an execution.

The knowledge of who had sent the agent to kill him would only come years later, but he still knew his mother was dead because someone wanted to kill him.

The day of her funeral he cried himself to sleep in Guen’s arms again, the way he had when An died. The next morning he went with Guen to training, and Mun, reading the grief and determination in Hiryuu’s eyes, did not try dissuading him from it.

Neither did Il.

Su-won rubbed his eyes. The fourteenth day since his uncle’s death was one of seclusion and fasting, meant to aid the soul on the journey to Heaven.

Thankfully, this particular keeping up of appearances demanded shutting one’s self up for a day, so as long as he followed the letter of the appearance by fasting, he could do as he pleased in his rooms. He used the free day to continue translating Yona’s writing into modern script.

He still wasn’t sure to make of the story unfolding. The more he translated, the more he began to believe it. Despite himself, his mind called up how Yona had thrown herself into dance after her mother’s death when he thought of how Hiryuu-ou had thrown himself into learning to fight after his adoptive mother was killed.

He couldn’t say if it was the humanizing detail or not. “Just what will I find at the end of this?” He asked himself, tidying up his desk as his eyes and brain told him to stop.

He had a feeling of just what he’d find at the end, and he wasn’t sure he would like it.

It had been an exhausting trek across Fire. With Hak’s knowledge the spots to check had narrowed to three. Between the need to stay out of the view of any soldiers and the sheer distance between the spots as they worked east, they were running on will after they checked the third spot and found nothing. “Let’s rest here for a day or two, before we check the mountains.” Hak half-suggested, half-ordered. “The village won’t be leaving that soon.”

They were in the mountain foothills, and there was a village within an hour’s walk where Yun could either sell his medicine or trade it for food. They camped by a stream, and Yona slipped her feet in the water with sigh of relief. Her feet were blistered from all the walking, and they and her legs ached in a way they hadn’t since she started learning dance.

Hak had gone off to hopefully find some game, Kija sat frowning against a tree some distance from camp, and Yun was checking his book to see if there was anything suggested for blisters. Finding something, he started preparing it. Thankfully he could use the herbs he had on hand, and as Hak healed, he needed fewer bandages.

The ball of fur that had been her first impression of Kija refined itself into something that felt more like a wild dog or a tamed wolf. Utterly loyal, but vicious to those who threatened those under his protection.
Pulling her feet out of the water, she examined her blisters. “Is it good or bad if they pop?” She asked.

“Depends. You don’t want infection, but usually they heal on their own. If it’s large or painful, it’s best to lance it at the edge and let it drain before covering it.” Yun lectured as he started treating her feet with his remedy. “Keep off your feet as much as you can today and tomorrow, since Raiju called a rest day. When we head out to check the mountains, I’ll pad the blisters before you put your shoes on; that should help keep them from being irritated further.”

She barely covered her yawn as she nodded. Yun turned to wash his hands off before he considered dinner, and when he turned back, she was fast asleep. “Man when she’s asleep she looks younger than me.” He commented, as Kija entered camp.

“She isn’t what I expected. Not that I really had many expectations, but…” Kija trailed off.

“Sometimes she seems so frail and near breaking, and other times it’s like she’s bamboo, capable of bending but not breaking.”

“And ready to hit anything when she rebounds.” Yun added.

“I don’t know if it’s because of the dragons’ blood, but I find myself wanting to support her every way I can.” Kija admitted with a faint blush.

“I find myself wanting the same thing, and I don’t have an ancient vow to blame.” Yun replied as Hak entered camp, carrying two rabbits.

“This isn’t one of the famine areas, but it’s still light game wise.” He commented as he handed the rabbits to Yun.

“Not surprising; with the reduced fertile land area, what’s still fertile gets pushed closer to the limit.” Yun replied as he began skinning the rabbits. “Hopefully we can get something for the pelts.”

Sitting down by Yona, Hak picked her up to cradle her head in his lap. Murmuring in her sleep, she turned to latch onto his jacket. “Speaking of limits, Hime-san needs to ease up on hers.”

“I know she’s been sneaking out at night to practice her archery.” Yun remarked, tossing the now chopped up rabbits into his pot to cook with wild potatoes. “Plus helping me with the cooking and learning to sew…”

“But why is she pushing herself so hard?” Kija wondered.

“She can’t forgive her helplessness. Both when it comes to protecting herself and sustaining herself, should she find herself alone.” Hak said as he idly played with her hair.

“Also, it’s part of how she’s dealing with the grief. After Cheonsa-sama was killed, she threw herself into dance. Enough to be ranked a dance master by the time she was thirteen.”

“Oh yeah; her mother was murdered too…” Yun remembered. “They never found the culprit for that, did they?”

“Not officially. Two years after it happened, the investigation was closed by His Majesty. All he said was that the traitors had been punished. I guess whomever was responsible died or was killed…” He frowned as he realized something. “Wait…if I’m remembering right, the investigation was closed a few days after Prince Yuhon’s accident.”

“Is it possible that Prince Yuhon killed her mother?” Yun wondered. “Guess the accident wasn’t
very much of an accident.”

“Su-won said Father killed Uncle.” Yona said, waking up to the smell of cooking food. “If Uncle had killed Mother, the punishment would have required the deaths of Su-won and Aunt Yon-hi. If there had been a secret deal between Father and Uncle…”

She shook her head. “At this point it doesn’t matter if Uncle was really killed by Father.”

“Huh?!” Kija exclaimed. “But—“

“At this point, all that matters is that Su-won believes it to have happened, since that was his justification for his actions.” Yona cut off his protest. “The cycle of revenge has to end somewhere. If I do manage to reclaim the throne, I have to consider how much to reveal, in regards to Mother’s murder and Uncle’s death.”

“Wouldn’t revealing that he killed your father and his sovereign be enough?” Yun asked.

Yona shook her head. “Too many people feel Uncle should have inherited to start with, so Su-won killing Father could be seen as him righting the wrong committed by Grandfather.”

“But turning up with the Four Dragon Warriors at your side…wouldn’t that swing things in your favor?” Kija asked.

“Uncle banned the text of the birth myth, and his influence was such that he was able to expel the priests and oracles from Hiryuu Castle. I don’t know how much having the Dragon Warriors on my side will help. It helped with Mundok, but he was already on my side.” She stared into the bowl of rabbit stew Yun handed her. “But I think…I wasn’t meant to have witnessed Father’s murder.”

“How do you figure?” Hak asked as they started eating.

“After he explained why he killed him, Su-won asked me what I was doing there, since his sources had told him that I hardly ever went to Father’s rooms.” She informed them. “He felt secure enough to kill Father in his own rooms. He had subverted the guards to the point of keeping the area unguarded, and they are probably loyal enough to him to not break ranks and admit to being accessories to murder. The only thing he did not account for was how I felt about him, and that I would make a rare trip to Father’s rooms to argue my case.”

“I was starting to wonder about the quiet, when I came across guards talking about how I was the only potential problem.” Hak said.

It was technically true; he HAD overheard the guards saying as much, when Shuten and Guen had come running to tell him what was going on.

Conversation lapsed, and shortly after the meal was finished they were asleep.

All but Kija, that is.

He couldn’t help feeling like he was failing her, having not found Seiryuu yet. It didn’t matter that they still hadn’t checked the mountains. The very fact he could not more accurately determine Seiryuu’s location gnawed at him as he eyed her bandaged feet. *If only I could sense my brothers better, Hime-sama would not have had to walk as much as we have.*

Hugging his knees, Kija dozed off, the noises that had freaked him out days ago no longer enough to keep him awake.
Following doctor’s orders, Yona stayed off her feet as much as she could the next day, and worked on the spare clothes for herself, Yun, and Hak. Baa-Baa had thrust several changes of clothes on Kija when they left, so he was good for a while. She had discovered that while sewing wasn’t necessarily hard, it was hard to sew in a straight line. Glaring at the hem of what was to be her spare cloak, she began pulling out the stitches to try again.

For the fifth time. “If you glare any more at it, it’ll catch on fire.” Shuten commented.

Yun and Hak had gone to the nearby village for supplies, and Kija had fallen asleep soon after they departed. The distinct absence of Guen indicated the reason behind it, added with his exhaustion and nerves. “Did all of you have to enjoy scaring him that much?” She asked, giving him a look that said she knew exactly what they had been up to.

“No our fault he made it too easy for us!” Shuten said defensively.

Rolling her eyes, she let the matter drop. Her patience at its end with her sewing, she gave up on it for the present, and just stared at her hands. She had practiced archery enough to begin forming the calluses on her hands from the bow and arrows, and she had stabbed herself enough times with her needle that she could pick those out as well. One day, with these hands, I will have to take a life, in defense of myself or others. She mused. Maybe even Su-won’s life.

Everything she felt about him was all tangled up inside. For all the newness of what she was developing with Hak, it still felt more like renewing an old relationship as opposed to starting a new one. Just when had my crush on him turned into so much more? When did I start wanting to keep him at my side like I did with Hak?

Yona pulled out the hairpin he had given her mere hours before running his sword through Father’s heart. “This almost feels like a relic of another time, between very different people.” She whispered.

“Isn’t it though?” Shuten questioned. “When he gave it to you, he was the man you loved and your biggest concerns were about recovering the country. Now, he’s a kin- and kingslayer, and you have to worry about staying alive, recovering your throne, AND restoring the country.”

“Not to mention the differences that have come about from the fire of Hiryuu-kami igniting.” Abi added, returning from shadowing Yun and Hak, who were drawing closer to camp.

It’s barely been a month, yet it already feels like so long ago, everything that happened before my birthday…

“Wait, isn’t this—” Shuten exclaimed, staring at the mountain ruins with dropped jaw.

“Yes.” Abi confirmed tersely, glaring at the ruins before them.

“Talk about ironies…” Guen couldn’t help commenting, as Kija confirmed the present Seiryuu was inside.

“Once again, Seiryuu must be rescued from this place…” Zeno whispered, his mind going back thousands of years ago, when the dragon’s power first became a curse instead of a blessing.
“I’m beginning to doubt that this is Seiryuu Village.” Yun commented as they rested in the chamber the village headman had led them to.

“Hime-sama, I definitely feel Seiryuu here—“ Kija started saying, only to be cut off by Yona. “I’m not doubting what you feel Kija.”

He turned pink, and the tame wolf inside seemed to be wagging its tail furiously, like it had when she’d told Kija he was irreplaceable.

Somehow Hak kept his mouth shut. It was kind of funny, how flustered the White Snake got when Yona complimented him.

He would totally kick his lily-white ass to Heaven and back if he actually tried anything, however.

“Either way, we know Seiryuu is nearby somewhere, and we can’t move on until we speak with him.” Yun said as he stretched. “I’m a pretty boy genius, so some maze-like caves are no challenge.”

“Rather full of himself, isn’t he?” Shuten commented to Guen. “This great-nephew of yours.”

“He takes pride in his abilities. Yun-mei was no different.” He replied.

Leading the way, no one could see Yun’s face. Okay, I KNOW I hear two people speaking. One of whom is a great uncle of mine. Something tells me that the voices belong to whomever Ohime-sama had been speaking to. But who’s Yun-mei? Mother had been Yu-shi, and Grandmother had been Yu-mei…

“…I’d be more impressed if we hadn’t walked into a dead end.” Shuten deadpanned as Yun added to his growing map, while Kija began raging at the ‘rudeness’ of Seiryuu.

(Yun twitched at the remark, but since no one else had reacted, he didn’t want the others to start thinking he was going crazy if he yelled at the voice.)

“He has to know we’re here!” Kija exclaimed, slashing at Hak, who had implied Seiryuu was avoiding him on purpose.

“We might be intruders not only to the village, but to Seiryuu as well.” Yona admitted. “If that’s the case, then—“

“Please don’t give up, Hime-sama!” Kija exclaimed. “He has to be waiting for a master who needs him, like I was.”

He was so earnest that Yona couldn’t bring herself to outright deny who she had been. “I can’t deny the bond, because I have felt you inside of me ever since our eyes met.” She told him quietly. “But that doesn’t make me Hiryuu-ou returned from the dead.”

She grabbed his dragon hand with both of hers’. “Kija, I doubt the other dragons have such positive views on their power like you do. Paralyzing someone with a look is more psychologically terrifying to people than bearing the strength of ten men. Not to mention highly coveted by those inclined to use it for ill. For Seiryuu, the dragon’s blood may not be a blessing, but a curse.”

Kija was entranced by the look in her eyes. He couldn’t find the words for it, but it was like she was
speaking directly to his soul, and all his predecessors that died longing. “Dragons’ blood or not, ancient vows or not… I’d like you at my side for as long as you wish to stay. And don’t ever try saying otherwise; I can feel you inside of me, so I’d know if you were lying.”

“If she keeps this up he really will fall in love with her.” Guen remarked. “Not that she’s actively trying, but…”

Hak didn’t bother trying to conceal the sour look on his face at Kija’s blatant crush. Not that he was jealous or anything of the musty old bond between his princess and him.

Fine, he was. Never mind that they shared a bond equally old.

“Maybe we should move on.” Yun proposed, breaking up the jealousy and burdening crush. “Something doesn’t feel right…”

“They’re probably watching us.” Hak remarked, leading the way out of the dead end.

Yona turned to follow the others when a strange noise caught her attention.

“Pu-kyu!”

“Some kind of animal…?” She knelt down and pressed her ear to the wall, where the sound seemed to come from.

Going off-balanced when the rock gave way beneath her hand, she just stared as the rock wall swung in, revealing a hidden passage. Sitting there was an absolutely adorable squirrel, who made the same noise as she picked it up. “Hak! Look at this—“ She cut off when she realized she was alone.

Completely.

Even Guen and Shuten had departed, and she hadn’t seen Abi since they entered the ruins. Kaya stuck with Zeno, and there was no way he’d be down here.

She hadn’t proved herself worthy of the power of Ouryuu.

A gust of wind came from nowhere and blew the torches out, and the squirrel darted off. I can’t tell which way I came in! Somehow she suppressed her scream when a hand appeared in the darkness. “Were you separated from your companions?” A male voice asked. “I’ll lead you to them.”

“Thank you.” She consented, taking his hand.

She didn’t feel very comfortable letting this man lead her back, but he was offering help…

The denials about Seiryuu once again struck her as odd, but that was forgotten as she realized they were headed down. “Why are we going down?!?” Utter terror filled her, as she fought to free herself from this man, who wanted to trap her in darkness forever.

“HAK! HAK—“

The sound of bells was the only warning as a hand came to rest on the wrist of the villager. Looking up, her eyes met those of the mask her savior wore, and suddenly there was a moon inside of her.

Seiryuu.

As he gently took her hand and led her out of the tunnels, Yona could only marvel at his composure.
The moon inside shivered with pain and confusion, yet none of it was revealed in his presence. The squirrel she’d followed into this section popped out of the fur Seiryuu wore on his head, and she couldn’t help smiling.

She only had Abi as a reference, but…

It felt entirely right for Seiryuu to have a small animal companion.

The warmth of his hand in hers seemed to transfer calm to her as they reached the well-lit (and populated) section. Yun fussed and yelled over her wandering off, and only Kija’s shock at realizing Seiryuu was standing in front of him cut off Hak.

The moon’s confusion turned to panic, and he ran back the way he had brought her, the bells growing fainter and fainter.

The sight of Kija, Hak, Guen, and Shuten raging was funny, but Yun distracted everyone from their collective outrage. “I can’t tell if he just made an appearance then left, or ran away.” He wondered. “So far, this place is the complete opposite of Hakuryuu Village.”

“Kija.” Yona drew attention back to her, as she cradled the hand Seiryuu had held as he led her out of the darkness. “If a Hakuryuu died while their successor was still a baby…would the next Hakuryuu have others to learn about the dragons from, or would everything die with the predecessor?”

“The whole village knows the stories, plus our library, so the whole village would have to be destroyed, and the villagers reduced to the youngest ones, who wouldn’t have learned everything.” He replied. “Why do you ask?”

“I think just such a scenario occurred for Seiryuu Village.” She answered. “Everything I’m feeling right now from him is pain and confusion. He doesn’t understand what happened. To him, and the whole village…the Dragon’s Eyes must be a curse that returns every generation. Not to mention the incident that drove them here years ago is still in living memory. If the reason they came here was to conceal the clan’s curse…all of them would be wary. I’m more surprised by the flat-out denials; open hostility would seem more likely.”

“Lemme guess…you want to go back into the maze to find him.” Hak said dryly. “And you won’t consider staying put while the three of us went after him.”

“Yun knows the way. While I can feel Seiryuu, I can’t tell where he is, so Kija has to come. And I doubt he’ll go along with outsiders dragging him out. Even if he doesn’t come with us, he deserves an explanation about what happened, and that can only come from me.” Yona explained calmly. “And someone needs to watch for the villagers.”

Never mind that ‘someone’ could be Guen or Shuten…

He grabbed her hands and pulled her close to him. Leaning his forehead on hers’, he said. “Come back safely. If you don’t, I’ll be staying annoying close for the rest of our lives.”

“As long as I can use the privy in peace.” She conceded, before kissing him deeply.

Yun and Kija both turned away with fierce blushes. While both had become used to the pair’s evening kissing routine, somehow this seemed far more intimate.

Kija was still getting used to the torch that was his master’s presence inside of him, but he felt
dwarfed by the sheer…feeling…it flared with. Love and possession and trust and longing… His death would break her. He realized in that moment.

Somehow they managed to pull away from each other, and they left Hak (and Shuten) behind as they went to meet with Seiryuu.

“You really sure about leaving Raiju behind? Aren’t you terrified?” Yun questioned as they worked their way back to the dead end.

“Yun! I’m trying to ignore it!” She exclaimed, embarrassed that her terror was so obvious. “And yes, I’m sure about leaving Hak behind. He’s always kept me safe…if I don’t do things without him, I’ll never get strong enough to keep him safe. I rely on him a lot, and one day, I’d like for him to rely on me, if only a little.” She admitted.

Kija couldn’t help sharing a glance with Yun. “Even though he wouldn’t mind you always relying on him?” Yun commented.

“That’s all the more reason to not always rely on him.” She replied. “Besides, he served Father, not me. Technically speaking, he is still following Father’s orders.”

“You know that’s not the only reason.” Yun reminded her.

“I know.” She said simply. “But what is between us now is new. Too new to be given precedence over his orders from Father.”

She was slightly ahead, so she didn’t see the disbelieving looks that passed between Yun and Kija with this statement.

Yona couldn’t help feeling a little nervous as they drew closer to the end of the tunnel where Seiryuu waited, bow-string taut. She wasn’t liking the feel of the tunnel; it just seemed to scream of the isolation and loneliness he had lived his whole life with. She wondered if he recognized her from the dreams they had shared, or even if he remembered them upon waking.

The bond of the dragon’s blood pulsed between them as she and Yun reached his chamber and their eyes met again. Abi was there with him, answering the question of where he was. Seiryuu drew his sword and roared at them, a cornered animal trying to scare them off.

It was definitely working with Yun. “Ohime-sama this wasn’t a good idea! I’m getting Kija--!”

“Hello again!” She greeted the squirrel who had bounced over to her, picking it up. “What’s its name?” She asked as the squirrel decided to see if her earring was eatable.

Seiryuu was quiet long enough for Yun to start panicking more before he answered. “…Ao…”

“He spoke!” Yun couldn’t help commenting, surprised.

“It doesn’t really suit it at all.” She remarked. ‘Ao’ was about the last name she’d have picked for it.

The moon inside tentatively agreed with her as Yun scolded her in a panic for not agreeing with Seiryuu. “Thank you for saving me earlier.” She said, reclaiming her earring from Ao. “My name is Yona; what’s yours?”

“…Seiryuu…” He cautiously answered.

“I mean your *name*. That’s…not really your name, is it?” She remembered Abi commenting to
Guen and Shuten that the clan had stopped naming the Seiryuu, but she was desperately he had been wrong.

There was a sense of bafflement from the moon, like he wasn’t sure why she was asking. “I…don’t have a name…just…Seiryuu…”

Her heart broke at this confirmation of what she’d feared, and she started walking closer to Seiryuu. “Stay back!” His sword stopped inches from her face. “Who are you?! Why have you come to the village? Why did you come to me? Why is the white dragon—?!”

**Why do you look like my dream friend? None of those dreams were real…**

“I came here to meet you.” Yona said quietly. “To ask if you would come with me, and lend me your strength.”

Abi and Guen winced, and Seiryuu seized the front of her cloak. “Those after the power of Seiryuu are enemies!”

The sword, no his whole body, trembled, the fierceness of the words not matching the moon inside. “…why?” He whispered. “I don’t know you…so why…?” His voice seemed near tears, and she wished she could wrap him up in a hug, and keep him safe while Hak and Kija terrorized the village that had so hurt this gentle soul.

More than that, she wished she could find the words to adequately explain why he had the Dragon’s Eyes. There was nothing she could really say that would make up for the generations of fear and lifetimes of isolation. “I’m not your enemy.” She whispered back. “My friends and I are looking for the Four Dragon Warriors in order to survive, and I’d like for you to become one of them, my friends.”

She lightly laid her hand on the arm holding her cloak, and he started, pulling away and letting her go. “But…I’m cursed…” He finally said.

“Cursed?”

“This…is a destructive power…it can never be known to the outside world…” The moon was tentatively certain in its resolve. “I will never use the power of my eyes again.”

“So you won’t come with us? There’s…nothing that will change your mind?” Yona wasn’t sure how she’d leave this particular tunnel, let alone leave the mountains, without him. *He must not remember anything from the dreams…of the promise to watch fireflies dance under the moon for real…*

“Leave.”

Reluctantly, she turned to leave. “I will say this.” She said, halfway through her turn. “Your hand…it was very warm and gentle. I don’t know anything about curses, but if such hands belong to someone who’s ’cursed’, then I don’t see what the problem is. It’s nothing…that I need to fear.”

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The young man who currently bore the power of Seiryuu slid down the wall of his chamber to sag on the floor as his visitors left. *I feel like crying…and my heart’s being torn apart…* He thought, clutching his chest. *But…why does it feel like some of the heartache is coming from someone else?*

He hadn’t paid much attention, but ever since he met the girl’s—Yona’s—eyes, a torch blazed inside. It was subdued, dimmed by the thought of leaving…him?
Ao the squirrel nuzzled his hand, not understanding why her blue dragon wasn’t leaving with the red dragon. Blue was supposed to protect Red.

“Do you intend to stay in darkness forever?” His sad-eyed specter asked, speaking for the first time in his memory. “Staying separated will only hurt both of you.”

For some reason, it now suddenly hit the young man that his specter had the same markings and eyes as Ao (best as he could remember).

His markings and eyes.

If it was just him hurting, he would have born it, the same way he bore the loneliness and fear. But knowing that Yona was hurting as much as he was, because of his fears…

He still had his sword.

He could lend her his strength without using his eyes.

Ao, picking up on a change in her blue dragon, leapt onto his shoulder as he stood and started creeping down the tunnel after Yona and the panicky boy.

His sad-eyed specter smiled faintly, and for the first time, his eyes weren’t sad.

“…why are you walking with your eyes closed?” Yun asked baffled as they left Seiryuu’s chamber.

“If they’re open, I’ll look back. If I look back, I’ll run back. There’s…nothing more I can do. He’s scared and hurting and confused. Running back, it—even though it feels like I’m leaving him in a dark cage…he’s the only one who can decide to leave.” Yona answered, digging her nails into her palms.

Frowning, she opened her eyes and looked ahead. “Kija’s upset about something.”

Yun was about to ask what when they reached him, a crowd of villagers in front of him. Shock shivered through them at their appearance. “They saw Seiryuu-sama…they can’t leave here alive.”

“I’ve been holding them off.” Kija explained, absently punching with his dragon arm. “I’m not using my power on them though.”

“You’re still hitting them with the strength of ten men you idiot!” Yun yelled.

Somehow dodging a swipe from a villager, he was about to point out that there was not enough room when rumbling started. “Earthquake!?”

Before she realized it, Yona found Kija covering her with his body, bracing against the wall as the rumbling increased. Fear, confusion, and dread filled her to such an extent, not only her own feelings but what she was getting from her dragons that she blacked out.

“I’ll dig us out.” Kija declared after she came to, unwinding the bandages on his dragon arm.

“Another monster!” Despite most of them being hit at least once by Kija’s arm, it was only when it was fully unveiled and enlarged that they realized what it was.
“So these are the protectors of Seiryuu village. Quit whining” Kija was not happy. “I told you; I am Hakuryuu.”

“Ha-hakuryuu-?”

“Dragons cursed more clans?! One of the villagers tore off his mask and started banging the cave-in section.

“Abi would be ashamed, seeing what his clan has become.” This drew attention to Yona, whose eyes were shadowed by her bangs.

She knew he was ashamed, but explaining that their ancestor was Not Pleased because he was haunting them was not the right course of action.

“Why would the headman-“

“So you managed to preserve the arguably least significant part of your heritage.” She clenched her fists in her cloak to keep her hands from shaking. “The founder of your clan, named Abi, was gifted the eyes of Seiryuu to protect and defend the founder of Kouka, Hiryuu-ou. This clan was founded to preserve and protect that power from the days of myth until it was needed again. I will not deny that it is a terrible power. Yet it is a power that has only been used in your defense. Despite the fear, despite the isolation…generation after generation of Seiryuu has protected you, with the only reward being terror, and the burden of passing the little knowledge preserved forward.”

Lifting her head, the fire in her eyes left the villagers frozen. “Do you really think…he killed the soldiers fourteen years ago on a whim?! A bandit who had escaped from his predecessor led them to you! How else could he have protected you? With a sword longer than he was tall? Even if he had done nothing, you still would have cursed him with your dying breath, for bringing soldiers down on you. His kind heart…would not allow him to let them kill you and your families. Only the character of his chosen has kept Seiryuu-kami from destroying you all.”

She snatched a knife from a villager. “I am digging out. If you have any desire to see your families again…you will help.”

The sound of metal hitting stone drew attention to Seiryuu, who was hitting a section of wall with an axe. “…here…leads outside…”

The repetitive nature of striking stone with the knife drained the anger and fire from Yona, who found herself caught by Seiryuu before she realized she was falling backwards.

“Seiryuu! Take Hime-sama to your room! The air should be better there.” Kija commanded, not pausing as he continued attacking the wall.

Her protests were cut off as Seiryuu picked her up and carried her to his room. Blinking, she found herself covered in his fur, and Ao placed on her shoulder. “I’m not cold, but…thank you.”

Nuzzling Ao with her cheek, Yona couldn’t stop the tears that started. “You’ve kept them safe for so long…why couldn’t they see that? Why does fear blind them so much?”

“…used to it…” He answered, the moon inside pulsing a sad resignation.

“I know it’s high-handed, yelling at them as I did. But I’m not sorry for it, and I won’t be sorry for wanting to help you.” She grabbed his hand. “No one deserves to be alone, least of all you.”

Squeezing his hand, she was both surprised and unsurprised when he squeezed back. “After all…I
promised we’d watch the fireflies dance in the flowers under the moon for real.”

“You remembered!” He exclaimed. “You’re…real…”

“I didn’t know if you remembered the dreams when you were awake. Kija, the white dragon, can’t, but his longing for a friend and my desire to connect to him as such clouds the knowledge. I’m glad that I’ve been able to meet you in person, for real.” She answered, her moon floating close to her sun inside, with the tamed wolf standing guard.

Once she was found worthy, Zeno would do much to help draw Seiryuu out of his shell. “I’m feeling better, so let’s go continue. The more people digging, the faster we can get out.” She said as she stood up, Ao leaping back to Seiryuu’s shoulder.
Chapter 22

“I will have Hakuryuu Village send people.” Yona informed the village headman. “I know I cannot change your views about the Dragon’s Eyes, but you should have the chance to regain the heritage you’ve lost, and learn why a child is born with them in your clan every generation.”

The headman merely nodded, too intimidated by the look in her eyes to attempt any protest. Those who had been trapped in the cave-in were whispering about what she had said. How the Dragon’s Eyes were bestowed on a person named ‘Abi’ to protect the founder of Kouka. How the clan had been founded to protect and carrying forth the Dragon’s Eyes from the times of myth under it was needed again…and how only the character of the Seiryuu has kept the clan from being destroyed by a wrathful Seiryuu-kami.

Her hair was a flame as she departed with her companions, the present Seiryuu following after bowing in departure. “Sir…can we trust what she said? How do we know soldiers won’t come pretending to be from this…‘Hakuryuu Village’?” His eldest acknowledged son asked.

“We can’t.” He stated simply. “But if our woes are because of our treatment of Seiryuu…we have no choice.” It will be my punishment…for casting out my firstborn when he greeted the world with Seiryuu’s eyes…and scorning my daughter to the point of death after she bore my grandson...

“Seriously, he speaks to her without prompting and they focus on the fact that he used her name?” Guen commented with a sweatdrop, Abi’s successor currently resembling a fur ball.

“And I thought WE had been a weird group.” Shuten added. “A descended dragon god, his foster brother, a doctor who moonlighted as an information broker, an ex-slave turned mercenary, and a maternal temple brat.”

“Now we have a princess on the run who is the reincarnation of said dragon god, a sheltered pretty boy scared of bugs, a kid more comfortable with animals than people, a beauty-obsessed pirate, and an immortal idiot.” Abi deadpanned. “Not to mention the self-proclaimed genius pretty boy and the male reincarnation of the dragon god’s wife.”

“Zeno isn’t an idiot Abi!” Zeno exclaimed, the others having joined him in his tree.

“When are you planning on joining up with them?” Guen asked. “It can’t be easy, staying away like this.”

“Yeah, especially with the fire burning and two dragons already at her side.” Shuten added.

“…after Ryokuryuu joins. She won’t be able to ignore the happenings in Awa. I think…she’ll prove to herself that she’s worthy of me being at her side openly.” Zeno said. “I’m scared…even though I’ll eventually join everyone in Heaven…I’ll still have to witness their deaths.”

“Can’t you just tell her that she doesn’t have to jump through hoops or whatnot for you to join?” Shuten asked.

“This isn’t about Zeno finding her worthy so much as it’s showing to herself that she’s worthy.” Abi pointed out.

“Ryokuryuu will be tricky enough without adding another dragon in.” Zeno said. “But you’ll be able to see Gi-mei! That’s something, isn’t it?”
“…except I’m jealous of the attention Jaeha gets from her. There’s no reason for her to see or feel me, or remember, but still…” Shuten slowly admitted, blushing faintly and sounding like a lovesick apprentice.

A glare from Kaya kept the others from laughing. Not that they really could; while each had only met Gi-mei a handful of times, they all knew how taken Shuten was with her…and suspected it went both ways.

“Do you have any suggestions on what to name Seiryuu?” Yona asked Yun that night, watching him grind herbs into powder to season their food.

She had an idea of a name, one that had floated around her head for years now, but she wanted the impressions of the others.

“Hmm…” Yun hummed, pounding a particularly stubborn piece. “The word that comes to mind for him is ‘quiet’. Just pick something that clicks for you.” He advised.

“I suppose…” She wondered. “I hope he’ll open up to the rest of you in time.”

“I doubt he’ll ever open up to us as much as he will to you. WE weren’t the ones to bring him out of that hole. The reason for the mask is probably psychological, so it could be a lifetime before he’ll take it off for good. By the way—" He turned to her with a pointed finger. “Are you SURE you’re royalty?!”

“Huh?” She blinked at him, not sure what he meant.

“You didn’t flinch when Seiryuu pointed his sword at you! You didn’t panic after the cave-in either!” He exclaimed. “Weren’t you scared at all?!"

“Of course I was. Seiryuu wasn’t though, which was good.”

For some reason, Yun felt like she was humoring him by saying she had been scared. “Don’t tease me about being scared!”

“I was too scared! I was terrified when the cave started rumbling!”

“It’s hard to breathe just remembering it!” Yun countered.

“Just take a deep breath.” Yona told him.

One beat, then two, and they started laughing. “That was a little ridiculous.” Yona admitted.

“…right from the start, you were nothing like what I expected nobles and royals to be.” Yun confided. “I’m sorry…for bringing up bad memories.”

“It’s alright.” She assured him with a shake of her head. “I had always remembered it, but for some reason, that time…my mind fully connected to the horror of it. I can’t blame you for being curious; it reminds me of Yun-mei.”

“Yun-mei?” He asked. *That’s the name the voice said, who’s my great-uncle of mine or something.*

“A daughter of him-me’s nurse. She was about six years younger, and the sister of the first Hakuryuu. You feel like her and her mother Yun-an, but you’re not either of them, so you’re probably a descendant, or maybe a reincarnation of a descendant. I’m not sure the exact connection.” She answered.
He wanted to ask her about the voices, but while she had been talking to something, he wasn’t sure if it had been the same voice.

He also wasn’t completely sure that he wasn’t going crazy.

“Have you been worrying about this whole time?” She asked, smiling. “You’re so cute.”

Yun felt his face grow hot. “He—“

“I’m going for a drink of water; I’ll be right back.” She told him as she stood.

“Umm…” She turned back to him. “Can I use your name? ‘Ohime-sama’ is really long and it’s a pain to always say it…”

“You’re really adorable Yun.” She said with a giggle.

“WHY ARE YOU SAYING THAT?!” He yelled as she skipped off to the nearby stream. “I’m a pretty boy… I’m not adorable…” He complained with a pout. “SHUT UP!” He yelled at the laughter coming from somewhere behind him.

Thankfully Kija was passed out, or he’d have some explaining to do.

After taking a drink and splashing her face, Yona found herself contemplating her reflection in the water, something she hadn’t had a chance to do since her birthday.

Looking close, she could see embers of fire in her pupils, and tiny flecks in her irises. Despite that, she didn’t feel any surprise or disconnect at her face.

The fire was hers now.

She was Yona, female human aspect of the Crimson Dragon God. Affirming herself meant she was no longer surprised by her feminine reflection.

“I thought the point of staying annoying close was to be close enough to touch me.” She said, drawing Hak from behind his tree. “Even if I did come out in one piece.”

“You still got into danger Yona—“ He paused when his hand touched hers, and pulled back. “—hime.”

“Hak…” She looked back at him. “I’d really like it... if you keep calling me ‘hime’.”

His eyes widened. “Yun and the others don’t need to, since I didn’t meet them as a princess. But...I want you to call me that...to remember my father...”

A sad half smile appeared on her face. “Even if the whole country forgets him...I want you, at least, to remember King Il and his daughter.”

Hak went down on one knee. “After the cave-in...I begged His Majesty not to take you with him. That all I wanted was for you not to go.”

Her tears began as she fell to her knees. “Trust me...I’ll never forget that you’re King Il’s daughter...”

He pulled her to his chest as silent tears fell, tucking her head under his chin. Several minutes passed before she pulled away, wiping her eyes. “It’s not just for that reason that I want you to call me...
‘hime’.

“Oh?”

‘When you call me ‘Hime-san’, it doesn’t feel like a title, but more like a name. That even if I had been born to laborers who struggled to feed themselves and their families, I’d be your princess regardless.’ She admitted with a blush. “And it’s a nicer pet name than ‘idiot’.”

“I could always call you ‘idiot princess’.” He suggested with a smirk, laughing at the face she made. “‘Hime-san’ it stays.” He assured her as he stood, holding out his hand for her.

She kept hold of it as they walked back from the spring, lacing their fingers together. “Do you have any suggestions for what to name Seiryuu?” She asked.

“‘Mask’.” He proposed in all seriousness.

She scowled at him. “For real. And you don’t get to name our children if that’s the best you can come up with.”

“Well then what do you think is a good name for him? He seems like the night to me.” He retorted.

“I’ve had dreams with the dragons ever since I was little, and I always met Seiryuu in a moonlit field full of flowers and fireflies. He’s bright, but in a different way from the sun, and he makes me feel calm…like the moon.” She answered quietly as they left the trees and came to a field much like the one from the dreams.

Seiryuu turned to look at them, and with the full moon shining down on him, he seemed like an extension of the scene. “Shin-ah.” She said as she dropped Hak’s hand and walked up to him.

The moon inside pulsed curiosity. “It means ‘moonlight. You took my hand and led me out of the darkness, gentle and warm. So you’re my moonlight, Shin-ah.” She told him with a smile. “Do you like it?”

The newly named Shin-ah nodded, before running after Ao. “Does he like it or not?” Hak questioned.

“He does.” Yona assured him, her moon radiating awe and joy over having a name that was all his own. “You go on back to camp. I want to send some time with Shin-ah alone.” She told him.

Hak frowned slightly, considering. I doubt he’d be carrying a sword like that if he didn’t know how to use it, and he’s already seemed to have opened up to her a little more than us… “If you take too long, I’ll come and carry you to bed.” He declared.

“Is that a promise?” She asked with a blink, mischief dancing in her eyes with the embers he had noticed over the last few days.

“I’d be dumping you with White Snake, just to see him have a melt down over being so close to you.” He informed her, turning back to camp with her laughter ringing in his ears.

Shin-ah sat down amidst the flowers near where Ao was chasing fireflies, trying to catch one to eat. It was no surprise when Yona came over and sat down with him, back to back with him. Reaching back, his hand found hers, and she squeezed lightly. “This is better than in the dreams.” She commented.
“…yeah…” He agreed, turning his head slightly as the sad-eyed specter approached, no longer sad-eyed.

“I had really been hoping what I had heard you tell Guen and Shuten was wrong, Abi.” She said to the specter.

“The power is a terrifying one, but that doesn’t excuse the clan from not naming my successors. Fifteen generations!” Abi complained.

Feeling the sense of a question pulse from Shin-ah, she began introductions. “This is Abi, the First Seiryuu. Long ago, the Crimson Dragon God decided to live among humans as one of them, curious about their lives and wanting to experience it for himself. Descending as an infant, he was found by a minor queen of the original Kouka, and inherited the throne. He met Abi when he went to the west, to learn about that province before deciding to either invade or suggest a peaceful union. When the Dragon Gods descended, as the human self of the Crimson Dragon God, Hiryuu-ou, was about to be killed, they wanted to destroy all of the humans, but he refused. To keep him out of trouble, they went and chose a person to bestow a portion of their power to, to protect him. After Hiryuu’s death, Abi had been targeted by those wanting the power of the Dragon’s Eyes. That event led to the Dragon Warriors going their separate ways.”

“It wasn’t until my daughter bore a son with blue hair and my eyes that I realized Hiryuu-sama would be reborn one day. The blood pledge I swore would carry forward, into a distant future to serve and protect Hiryuu-sama again.” Abi picked up the story. “I never regretted accepting the dragon’s blood…but I never wished for any of my descendants to inherit that power.”

“It’s…not a curse?” Shin-ah tentatively asked.

“No. Its power is fearsome, I will not deny, but it was meant to help protect Hiryuu-ou…my past self.” Yona said.

She had been conflicted about admitting this to Shin-ah, but her heart told her it was the right move. Kija would take more time for her to feel comfortable confirming what he believed, and she wasn’t touching the subject with Ryokuryuu until she had to.

She shuffled around to be face to face (well face to mask) with Shin-ah. “I don’t care about any of that. The power is yours and yours alone, and it was meant to help protect Hiryuu-ou…my past self.” Yona said.

She shuffled around to be face to face (well face to mask) with Shin-ah. “I don’t care about any of that. The power is yours and yours alone, and I will never order you or force you to use it. I hope one day that you’ll feel comfortable enough to take your mask off among those you trust, but I’ll never order that of you either. Keeping you at my side…and helping you find a place in the sun…is all I’ll ever ask of you…” She told him quietly with bowed head.

The torch burning inside screamed truth and trust and hope. Slowly, Shin-ah pushed his mask to the top of his head. “Yona.” He whispered.

Raising her head, she couldn’t help smiling as she met his eyes for real. “Thank you.” She murmured, leaning forward to kiss Shin-ah on the cheek, on one of the red marks.

Ao chittered happily as she watched her blue moon dragon open up a little to the red dragon girl. His shell was tougher than any nut, and she bounded over to them, perked up by this crack in it. Being out among green living things again was a small joy compared to this sight. “Hello Ao.” The red dragon girl greeted as she leapt onto her shoulder, nuzzling back when she nuzzled her cheek. “I know I said ‘Ao’ doesn’t really suit you, but I find myself changing my mind. I’ll help you take care of him.”

“Pu-kyu!” Ao agreed. While it would be nice if taking care of her blue moon dragon meant...
accepting him as her mate, the red dragon girl smelled too much like the tall dark one for that to be possible.

She glared at the missive from back home. “They’ve gotten more idiotic since becoming the Wind Tribe. ‘Free-spirited’ doesn’t mean ‘do whatever the hell you want’!” She complained.

Looking up, she saw her idiot husband walking over, slightly red-faced. “So did one of the Monkeys explain things?”

He nodded as he sat down next to her on the bench. “I went to Guen, and he took me to Shuten. I should have realized you wouldn’t check a temperature that way.” He answered, rubbing his forehead where their heads had collided when she tried to kiss him, only for him to miss the message. “Why do you call them monkeys anyway?”

“One of the strangest clans I’ve ever known is the Spiral Clan. They’ve got twisted ideas of revenge. The last clan that pissed them off had a troop of monkeys unleashed in their main compound. The way your warriors fight with each other reminds me of those monkeys fighting.” She told him. “I’m surprised you didn’t realize what I was trying to do. Was it because I was initiating instead of you?”

He blinked at her. “I’ve never done anything like that. There were times, in the morning when I woke up… but nothing with another person.”

She stared at him. “…tell me you at least know what is meant by ‘marital relations’.”

“I know what that is, but I’ve never done any of it.” He answered. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for it. It’s just unusual for a man in your position to have not done it.” She told him. “You sure the green one has to lead the Wind Tribe? They’ve taken ‘free spirited’ and turned it into ‘carefree’!”

“Most of his group were from that area originally, so it made sense, like how I got the northeast since the kingdom was originally running from about the castle to halfway to the sea.” He told her. “What are they doing?”

“…napping on gate duty.” She admitted with a blush, knowing that she was overreacting to it. “Just because things are relatively peaceful in the borders doesn’t mean they should treat it so casually.”

“Is that the only thing in there bothering you?” He asked.

Cursing in her head, she took her time answering. “…Grandfather is asking when I’ll be pregnant. It’s only been six months; the way he’s going on you’d think we’ve been married ten years and were still childless.”

“…does it bother you that I haven’t… we’ve been sharing a bed yet hadn’t…?…” Her husband, looking worried, asked.

“Not really.” She slowly answered. “Grandfather’s complaints are bothering me more but…”

Turning her head, her husband’s face was surprising close. “Shall we try this again?” He proposed with a blush. “I mean, if you want to; I’m ready whenever you are—” She silenced him with her mouth.

His lips were a pleasant warmth against hers. Opening her mouth to let his tongue in, there was suddenly a fire in her as their tongues touched. It seemed to be a fire he shared as he pulled her
closer, tangling fingers in her bun. She shivered as his nails lightly scraped her scalp, and fisted her hands in his robes.

Unfortunately their lungs intervened for air. Opening her eyes as they pulled apart enough to breathe, she could see sparks in his eyes. “Woah…” He whispered.

She grinned broadly, but something caught her attention, making it vanish. “…How long have you monkeys been there?!?” She screeched, glaring at the four dragons decorating a nearby tree.

“We had to make sure he didn’t collide heads again!” The green one defended, in a panic as she drew her knives. “You have until the count of three to run.”

“Hey, wait—“

“THREE!!!” She took off running at the dragons, throwing her knives as they tripped over themselves trying to get away.

Blinking, Hak realized that he was still sitting on the bench, watching his past self terrorize the Monkeys for spying on her and Hiryuu. Turning his head, he saw Hiryuu watching him with a fond smile. “I apologize for the intrusion, but I wanted to meet Ha-kun’s reincarnation as myself.” He said.

“…is that the only reason she paid attention to me?” Hak found himself asking.

“It was an attention getter, being her reincarnation, but all the attention after the first moment has been on you. She loves you for you, not for who you had been.” Hiryuu assured him, which surprisingly worked.

“I know it was a dumb thing to ask.” Hak muttered as he looked away.

“It wasn’t. Until recently, she questioned herself about the very same thing. Ha-kun can reach you now because the fire was lit. As a dragon’s mate, your soul bears traces of the fire from that time, so it resonates with her fire.” Hiryuu told him. “Please, keep her safe as she finds her strength, not only to survive, but to thrive and reclaim Kouka.”

“You needn’t even ask.”

Hak woke to the predawn lighting up Yona’s hair into flames. Smiling to himself, he pulled her a little closer and drifted back to sleep.
Chapter 23

Time passed, and Hiryuu found himself surprised at how fast the years went by. Human lives were blinks of the eyes of Heaven, yet the experience of the passage of time was completely different. He guessed that it had to do with how fast everything changed on Earth.

In the thirteenth year of his time on Earth, he began the rite of passage all humans went through between childhood and adulthood.

Puberty.

He woke up one morning feeling strange. His penis was sticking up, and felt oddly hard when he poked it with a finger. He wasn’t sure what to make of the tingles he felt when he did that, and every touch of cloth seemed to make the tingles more intense. He huddled under his blankets, and decided to wait for Guen. He’d be sure to come get him when he didn’t appear for morning training, and he was older, so he had to know what was going on.

Guen just slapped a hand on his face when he arrived to haul Hiryuu out of bed and was greeted with a babbled rant of how ‘his thing was hard and it feels weird and how do I make it go back to normal?’ With a sigh, he explained what was happening to the former dragon. “When a boy is old enough to become a man, stuff like this happens. When a man gets…aroused, his penis gets hard, and if it is stimulated enough, he climaxes, issuing his seed. It’s not something that can be controlled, and for whatever reason, starting around your age, you can wake up to find your penis hard.”

Hiryuu peeked at him wide-eyed. “That is so weird! How do I make it go back to normal?”

“You can ignore it, and it’ll go away on its own, or you can stimulate it until you climax.” Guen answered, wishing there was someone else to explain all this.

Then again, even if there was, Hiryuu would go to him anyway, out of trust.

He got a blink and a question. “How do I stimulate it?”

“You touch it, with your hand or cloth or whatever. Sooner or later you’ll get there.” Guen could hardly believe he was having this conversation, but he wasn’t surprised by it either.

“Can you show me how?” Hiryuu asked innocently.

“That’s it; I’ll let Pa know you’re running late and might not make it.” Guen declared, turning red and hurrying out of the room.

“But I don’t get it!” Hiryuu half shouted, half whined, as he shut the door.
Safely outside, Guen leaned on the door and hid his face in his hands, willing his face to cool. No way in hell was he telling Pa the real reason behind Hiryuu’s tardiness. Never mind how he had been accidently propositioned by him.

Hiryuu pouted, and curled on his side. He didn’t really understand what Guen meant by touching it, but he had to get out of bed eventually, and the only way out was to take care of this.

While the tingles had been weird, they were weird in a good way. Frowning, he studied his penis in a way he never had before. The skin that covered the end was pulled back, revealing bright red, with fluid leaking from the hole at the end. He bit his lip hard when he touched it, *something* shooting up his spine and making his toes curl. He hadn’t noticed before, but he was starting to get hair where his penis joined his body, the same color as the hair on his head.

He switched from biting his lip to biting his one hand, while the other continued its study. It felt like the fire that filled his whole being, but it was a completely different kind of fire. It got harder and harder to stop the noises he was making, even with biting his hand. Suddenly, everything went white, and his hand was wet. He blinked at the whiteish fluid on his hand and the bedclothes. “It doesn’t look like the seeds of plants…” He wondered, wiping his hand on the sheets.

Finally able to start his day like normal, he resolved to ask Guen what he meant by ‘seed’, since it didn’t look like any of the seeds he’d seen before.

Su-won had to stop there, unable to continue, red-faced and a little aroused. It wasn’t quite the fantasy he had half-expected, yet it was more…involved…then a girl Yona’s age should rightfully know.

“I guess those poetry books hid ones dealing with…*that* too.” He told himself as he tidied his desk, not able to voice what *that* was, despite being alone. “But how would she know just how it feels?” He asked as he tucked the books away in the safest place he could think of: on his person.

Exiting his rooms, he headed towards her rooms, hoping she had suggestions regarding Earth’s economic situation. He had some ideas, but it seemed like she had more recent and through information.

Thankfully Yun was able to trade medicine for paper and inkstones in the second village they passed after leaving the mountains. Working on the tent, he found himself watching Yona as she wrote two letters, one to Baa-Baa explaining the situation of Seiryuu Village and asking that she send people to help and teach them of their forgotten heritage (people who would be able to handle the completely opposite, negative view of Seiryuu Village, she emphasized), and one that served as a letter of introduction for whomever was sent from Hakuryuu Village.

While she had no clue about the general level of literacy outside the castle, she was sure the headman would be able to recognize such a letter if he saw one based on the seals, even if he couldn’t read the letter itself. “Is it a good idea to use your seal?” Yun asked as she stamped her seal on each letter, before moving to wrap each one and seal the wrapping as well. “You’re technically in hiding…”

“I imagine that I’m technically dead.” She reminded him. “By all rights Hak and I shouldn’t have survived the fall off the cliff, and even if Kan Tae-jun only informed Su-won, I doubt he’s actively looking for me. And with the secrecy of both villages, I doubt either would give me up on purpose. Doesn’t mean it won’t happen by accident, but the only way to avoid that disappeared when we left Ik-su.”
Shrugging, Yun glared at Hak, who was watching him make the tent with hyper focus. “Staring at me will not make me sew faster. Go make yourself useful and get some game for dinner.” He ordered.

Rolling his eyes, Hak gestured at Shin-ah to come with him. Hunting would definitely be easier with his eyes, and he had a feeling White Snake may be annoying him with all his talk of the Four Dragon Warriors and Hiryuu-ou and the brotherhood of the dragons. “If his talk gets to be too much, let me know and I’ll distract him.” Hak told Shin-ah. “I doubt his rosy view of the dragons is that comforting, after a lifetime of a negative one.”

Shin-ah shrugged. In truth, he focused on how someone was talking to *him*, not at him or in front of him, too much to be bothered by the content of the speech. He did wonder if Kija had anything else to talk about, however.

Hak kept an eye on Shin-ah and an eye out for game. It was hard to get a read of him, with only the mouth to work with. He didn’t want to start babbling about anything to Shin-ah, that’s what White Snake was for. “Is there anything you want to know about that’s not related to the dragons?”

Shin-ah pointed at his guando. “About this?” At his nod Hak started talking about his weapon and how it was different from using a sword or regular spear.

By the time they returned to camp with three birds, the initial talk about the weapon had wound its way through the Five Generals, the Wind Tribe, and how he wasn’t looking forward to teaching Yona swords. “The worst part is I know she’ll go off herself no matter what I say or do, so even if I don’t like it, it’s better if I’m watching in case she gets hurt.” Hak explained.

“…why?” Shin-ah asked.

Hiding his shock at Shin-ah speaking, Hak asked, “Why don’t I like it?”

Shin-ah nodded. “I promised her father, the late King Il to protect her. Her handling weapons goes against everything he believed in. I want to keep her bundled up in silk and somewhere safe, yet at the same time, I want to show her off to everyone back at the castle, who thought she was just a silly little girl.” Hak explained. “I just haven’t fully resolved the two yet. But with how things are now… protecting her means letting her learn to protect herself.”

Shin-ah thought about all of that throughout the evening as he watched Hak with Yona. Even when he was teasing her, and she was yelling at him red-faced, the words didn’t match how their eyes sparkled and the lingering touches. He had watched the village too much to not realize they were ‘in love’, even if he was still a bit hazy on what ‘love’ was.

Whatever it was, Yona’s torch pulsed with it, and a fire that brought to mind the frantic couples he’d seen, pulling off their clothes and utterly desperate to touch each other. He took his cues from Yun and Kija when the two started the evening kissing routine. He didn’t understand why Kija was always red when it happened. The torch radiated contentment, so he didn’t get what the problem was. Maybe because they didn’t make an effort to try hiding? But Yun just ignored them, while his ancestor Abi had to sit on the first Ryokuryuu with Kija’s ancestor the first Hakuryuu when Yona started kissing Hak.

“He’s very defensive about girls and the possibility of them being hurt sexually. Then though Yona’s fully involved and Hak would never hurt her, it’s a slow process.” Abi explained.

Abi could see the confused look through Shin-ah’s mask, and began telling him the reasons why there would be so many pairs of people so desperate to touch each other without any clothes on.
Knowing he had likely seen quite a bit, Abi covered the whole list as the camp settled down for the night.

He was glad his mask covered his face the next day when he thought about what his ancestor had told him. His face felt hot, and he didn’t want to answer questions about why.

Yona seemed to sense what was going through his head, and the torch gave off a sense of comfort, like the dim memory of Ao holding him when it was cold.

After the encounter with the man, it was several days before Yona could bring herself to practice her archery. While she and Hak and perhaps Mundok would remember him as a person, everyone else would only remember a poor king who did nothing as the kingdom edged towards destruction. “The problem with sending royal aid is that it has to go to each Tribe’s capital first.” She explained to Yun over their sewing. “It can’t go direct to where it’s needed most. If it was Sky lands then it could go direct, since we’re in charge of Sky, but otherwise it’s up to each General to distribute royal aid and royal bounties.”

“And since Kan Su-jin is diverting all resources to his army, it would be like encouraging what he’s doing, which could offend the other tribes, right?” Yun asked.

“Exactly. There’s a reason why the leading book on domestic politics is titled ‘How To Keep The Tribes From Killing Each Other’.” She confirmed. “Fire and Wind are the most temperamental, Wind not as much as Fire. Sky tries to keep above it all. Water is very even tempered, but dangerous if pushed to breaking. And Earth is very reliable as long as the king has the general’s loyalty.”

“It makes sense if you look at it macro level, why there’s no royal aid, but that doesn’t mean much when you’re starving. And why couldn’t he have kept Kan Su-jin from acting as he has?” He asked, running an eye over the seam she had just finished.

“That I’m not sure. The Fire General and Grandfather were childhood friends, I think. Maybe that has something to do with it.” She suggested with a shrug. “Once we find Ryokuryuu and Ouryuu, I need to meet with Mundok again. He should know something about what Father’s main goal was. And why Uncle Yuohon was passed over as King.”

“Isn’t that a bit risky?” He asked, concerned.

“Hak knows the safest ways in and out of Fuuga. Wind is the one Tribe I know is on my side.” She assured him.

To annoy Hak, Yun took his sweet time with the tent, not finishing until after the detour to Hakuryuu Village to deliver the letters. Yona had sent Kija and Yun to deliver them, as poor Shin-ah would likely be mobbed by the villagers eager to meet another one of the Four Dragon Warriors.

Shin-ah tilted his head as a flash of gold caught his eye. It was a blond haired man, about 500 feet out. He didn’t seem threatening, and he could see the first Ryokuryuu, Shuten talking with him, so he must be hanging back for some reason.

Needless to say, when Yun finished the tent the first night they were in Earth Tribe lands, Hak was thrilled. “Rest day!” He called the next morning once it was set up, pulling a giggling Yona in with him.

Unfortunately this left the other three without much to do, and little desire to stick around in camp. Rolling his eyes, Yun grabbed a red-faced Kija and hauled him to the nearby stream to do laundry,
using Kija to gather wood so he could boil water for washing instead of just using cold water.

Shin-ah looked at Abi. “The more intimate part of their relationship is fairly recent, and being aware of how far Seiryuu can see, haven’t had the privacy to do much beyond kissing.” Abi explained.

He nodded, wandering somewhat in the direction of the blond-haired man, who seemed to be enjoying himself somehow, despite being dead to the world in slumber. Climbing into a tree, he pushed his mask up and marveled at the scenery, Ao prancing from branch to branch.

Ao curled up on top of her blue moon dragon’s head, in the fur he wore for extra warmth.

Remembering what Kija and Yona had said about looking for Ryokuryuu, and how he felt ‘green’, Shin-ah looked in the direction they were traveling, where Kija had said Ryokuryuu was. Pushing his sight to the sea, a figure darting from roof to roof in a town on the sea drew his attention, his hair a ribbon of green behind him. He left the town and landed on a ship with an old woman dressed in purple standing on the deck.

Pulling back, he had to pull his mask back down. He had never pushed his eyes like that before and the light made them ache even more then the effort of seeing that far had. Sensing his pain, Ao pulled out a nut and tried pushing it in his mouth. “I can’t eat the shell Ao.” He told her, and she cracked it out of the shell before pushing it in his mouth.

Nuzzling his neck, she settled down to enjoy the greenery she had given up for her blue moon dragon with him. Hopefully being out in the light and greenery would improve his color; she wasn’t sure his skin was meant to look as it did.

Yona couldn’t quite stop giggling after Hak pulled her in the new tent, making sure no one could look in. “Someone’s very eager.” She commented, her giggles changing to moans as Hak started kissing her. His teeth found that spot on her neck, and fire seemed to gather in her breasts and down low. Shoving her hands inside his robes, her fingers found his most recent scar.

Pulling back, she pushed the robes down, baring his chest. He couldn’t stop the shivers as her fingers ghosted over the length. He let her push him down, hovering over him with eyes focused on the scar. It was still pinkish, and more tender than he’d ever admit. Opening his mouth to comment that if his clothes were coming off then so should hers, he bit off a moan instead as she started kissing the scar. His hand found her sash, and he pulled it and her vest open, to be stymied at her tunic-like dress. Finishing her worship of this first scar earned in the struggle to survive, she groaned as his hand cupped her breast through her dress, running a thumb over the nipple. Grasping his own sash, she succeeded in getting his robes fully open.

Reluctantly she pulled away enough for him to properly remove them, pulling off her vest as he did. “We sure?” He whispered, pulling her back to cuddle on his chest.

“Yes. I checked with Yun, but the only sure way to not get pregnant is to not have traditional intercourse. Or are you worried we’re going too fast?” She answered, lifting her head to meet his eyes.

“Maybe a little worried.” He admitted. “Can’t help it, really. It’s my job after all.”

“And if I made it an order…” She half suggested, fire blazing in her eyes.

Hak couldn’t stop the blush at her suggestion, even as the rest of his blood flowed south. “Maybe not now…” Gods, the idea of following her orders in a situation like this…
He’d gladly service her and ignore his own needs anyway, but the thought of her ordering him to do so…he shuddered at the thought.

She seemed to sense what he was thinking of, given the wicked grin that crossed her face. “Not this time.” She promised, leaning in to kiss at his neck, his hands dipping the neck of her dress to stroke the skin.

He yelped a little when her nails grazed his nipples, and he felt her smile on his neck. “Oh, hel—“ He cut off into a moan when her tongue licked one.

As she continued the all important task of examining his nipples with her tongue, she lightly scrapped her nails down his chest as he pulled her dress up, bunching it up to run his hands up her spine.

Yona couldn’t contain her slight jump when his hand squeezed her bare bottom, much to Hak’s amusement. Sitting up, she kept her eyes on him as she pulled off her dress, flushing under his intense gaze, she fisted her hands in the robes beneath them to keep her arms from reaching up to hide from it.

With infinite gentleness he guided her to lay beneath him. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes as he kissed like she was something fragile, a shrine placed high upon an altar, brought down to worship.

Fire followed his touch as she buried her hands in his hair, his tongue lavishing her breast. Maybe later she’d reflect on the differences in the experience of sex, but right then it was just the two of them. He was settled between her legs, and bucking up as he nipped an extremely sensitive spot on the underside of her right breast, she felt his pulsing, hot hardness straining the cloth.

He pulled back after working his way down her torso with his mouth, running his hands along her thighs, avoiding where she wanted to feel them the most. Raising up on her forearms, she was about to tell him to get on with it when he ran a finger along her folds, pressing lightly when he reached the nub at the top.

She shuddered violently and forgot what she had been going to say. Staying up on her forearms was too much effort as his fingers continued caressing her folds and nub, occasionally diverting to caress the very back of her thighs, leaving trails of her wetness behind. She pushed back against his hand, and nearly shouted when his fingers finally dipped in.

Hak was inside of her.

They felt different, his fingers, from when it had been her fingers, but it didn’t matter since it was Hak-Ha-kun-Dark Dragon and even if he died tomorrow, nothing could erase that she had had a part of him inside her.

He did his best to memorize the way she looked, spread on his robes and flushed pink all over, pushing down on his fingers and not even aware of the sounds she was making, moans and groans and parts of words, some of which could not possibly be in present-day Koukan. It was a heady feeling, being trusted to make her come apart like this. He leaned down, and flicked his tongue over her nub, still rubbing his fingers inside of her.

She really did shout that time, shuddering and shaking and drenching his hand and face in her wetness. Pulling his fingers out, he laid down next to her and gently held her as she panted and recovered. “Good?” He murmured in her ear, feeling close to bursting and hardly knowing how he sounded put together in any way.
Yona felt his pulsing hardness against her hip, and as soon she felt capable of coordinated action, pushed him to lay on his back, reaching for his pants. He lifted his hips as she pulled his pants over and off his erection as gently as she could. Splaying her hands on his thighs, she just took in his body, muscled and scarred from a lifetime of training and fighting. His erection looked bigger than it had felt, and her mind boggled at something Mistress Sayuri’s book had described, about taking him in her mouth.

She took him in her hand, memories of ways to touch floating up. A distant part noted it was different when it was attached to someone else, but it was overtaken by cataloging his reactions to various things she tried.

He did his best to try not to buck up into her hand, the one on his hip anchoring him somewhat. Bizarrely, he found her face as she concentrated on the task at hand adorable. Somehow managing to sit up, he pulled her head to him, kissing her deeply and thrusting his tongue into her mouth the way he wanted to thrust into her one day, fast and deep.

Her hand paused at his base as the kiss ended, something sparking in her eyes. Leaning down, she did the last thing Hak expected.

She took his tip into her mouth.

Sudden, hot wetness sent him over the edge, and he fisted his hands in his clothes, dimly hearing her cough and pull away as he came. Flopping down, the sight of her wiping his seed off her mouth and chin had his penis twitching, before waving a white flag in surrender.

Pulling the flap open a small bit to let some fresh air in, she flopped down next to him. “Wow.” She commented, suddenly finding it hard to meet his eyes, which was ridiculous after what they had just done.

“Oh, so I didn’t leave you speechless? Guess I’ll have to try harder next time.” He promised, his penis twitching again valiantly as he thought of ways he could fulfill that promise.

“I think Yun went to do laundry.” She said, shivering as she pulled her dress back on, her skin still tingly and sensitive. “He’ll make you wash them yourself.”

He shrugged as she poked out enough to grab his bag from outside the tent. “Shouldn’t you be more worried about how Shin-ah and White Snake will react when they get back? You did say they could feel you, right?”

She uttered a curse he didn’t realize she knew, and she smacked his ass when he laughed and turned to pull his pants on.

While Shin-ah looked perfectly fine later, Kija was stuck in a permanent shade of pink, and couldn’t disguise his relief when Yona bedded down in the tent…alone. The moon inside didn’t seem upset, quietly enjoying her happiness and contentment, while the tamed wolf seemed utterly confused, not sure if it should maul Hak for ‘defiling’ her or for being able to do what it had wanted to do.

Yun resolutely ignored the by-play, and mostly succeeded, save for the pink ears. Ao, torn between the richness of choices to snuggle with during the night, picked him.

Humans were so weird, she had realized, about mating.

Zeno had a ball tossing Shuten around once everyone was asleep, letting him rage work his frustrations out, and more than a little thrilled to fight with his brothers in a way he hadn’t been able
to during that time.

Chapter End Notes

...excuse me while I have some playtime of my own after writing that...
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next morning Shin-ah was able to bring himself to recount the details of where he had spotted someone whom he thought was Ryokuryuu. He was highly uncomfortable with everyone, living and dead, focusing on him. Yona squeezed his hand and the torch pulsed with calm and reassurance. “Hmmm…” Hak thought as he studied the map, trying to place which port lay in their direction of travel. “That sounds like Awa.”

Yona couldn’t help paling a little. “That’s the only port?”

“What’s wrong with Awa?” Yun asked.

“Do you remember how I said the famine in Fire was just the start?” She reminded him, continuing with his nod. “There’s not much evidence making its way to the top, but it’s more than possible that Awa’s Lord, Yan Kum-ji, is involved with drug smuggling and human trafficking.”

“EH?!?” Yun and Kija exclaimed.

“Water is in the midst of a drug epidemic. From what my informant was able to learn, the drugs are entering Water through Earth. It’s closer to Kai, and Kum-ji has made a lot of profit. About the only valuable thing he could be trading for drugs is people.” She said bluntly. “Mostly young women and girls. Maybe some young boys as well.”

“Can’t the officials do anything?!” Kija yelled. “Isn’t there oversight?”

“Most of the officials are corrupt, perfectly willing to look away for a cut of the profit. The few who might speak out against it are scared into silence by threats to their families, likely involving their wives and daughters being sold to Kai.” She answered. “With the economic decline in Earth, as long as the taxes—at least, the expected taxes—reach the right people, they won’t be paying close attention to just how he readily delivers taxes when other places struggle.”

“Why is Earth in decline? The famine areas in Fire aren’t close enough to reach into Earth…” Yun wondered.

“Their main source of income is mining iron ore. But the mines’ output is decreasing, so they have to dig deeper and deeper, and run into the limits of what can currently be accomplished with the tools we have. There’s probably other metals and minerals that could be valuable, but without seeing the source rocks, it’s hard to know just what that would be. Another industry would help, but I don’t know what that could be either.” She elaborated. “Mining is so tied to their way of life it will be hard to get them to look elsewhere. I don’t know how to sway the general to my side either. Li Gun-Tae is an admirer of Uncle Yu-hon, so Su-won has a step up in gaining his loyalty then I do. He can also fight the general to prove himself more easily than I could.”

“Couldn’t he fight a champion of your choosing?” Kija asked.

“Hak beat him five years ago, at thirteen, and he’s my obvious champion, so I don’t think he wants to fight Hak again. No offense to either you or Shin-ah, or Ryokuryuu or Ouryuu, but I haven’t seen you fight enough to feel comfortable about your chances of victory.” She explained, shaking her head.
If she wanted Gun-Tae dead, Zeno would be the perfect choice, as much as she loathed the idea. His way of fighting was precise and lethal, with little regard for his personal safety. He had had centuries of honing the ways to end fights quickly, and if he drew it out long enough for the scales to appear...

But she had no idea who’d succeed him, so she preferred a known variable to an unknown one. “Yun and I will have to be the most careful.” She said, returning to the subject of Awa. “As long as we don’t stand out too much, and stay with someone, we should be fine.”

Yun gave her a disbelieving look, not confident in her ability to not stand out much. Yes, her hair made it harder, but he shouldn’t be as doubtful as he was! Not to mention acting like Hak would stand out that much. With the blade covered, his guandao looked like a regular spear or polearm, and coloring wise he blended in more than Yun.

While she knew someone had to worry about such things and about keeping them fed and healthy and not looking like beggars, he could do with worrying less. He’d end up gray by the end of the journey!

“Am I allowed to ask about the differences?” Hak asked a day out from Awa. “Between things now and things back then?”

With only one tent, Yona had insisted on a rotation on using the tent. Until another tent could be made, it really wasn’t fair for only her, or her and Hak or Yun, to be using it.

They had paired off; her and Hak, Yun and Kija. Shin-ah and Ao formed the last pair, and if Ryokuryuu joined, they’d reconsider the pairings.

Hak bedding down with Kija was completely out.

He didn’t need to elaborate on what he meant by ‘things’. “Arousal, back then, was like pot instantly boiling; now it’s a simmer. And there’s not really a point of no return, until it’s practically about to happen.” She answered after some thought. “I haven’t really compared it. But what I’m remembering from his solo fun has been very helpful.” She added with a grin. “The book Mistress Sayuri gave me for my birthday, the last time I visited, helped too.”

Unfortunately playtime had been limited by her cycle. Kija’s freak out about women bleeding every month topped Hak and Su-won’s reaction. Shin-ah had been more confused by Kija’s reaction than anything. One of the abilities forgotten over the years was the ability to look deep, inside the body. The Seiryuu spent so much time looking far that they didn’t have much cause to look close and deep, or reason to notice they were doing so, except when they paralyzed people. But he had been a specter in his village for so long, and the caves murky enough that he had learned about women bleeding, even if he hadn’t known the reason. She knew Abi was teaching him everything he had learned over his life and afterlife about the Dragon’s Eyes.

Hak shifted a little, blushing. This time, instead of mutually bringing each other to climax, she had teased him and drew him to the edge and back a couple times before letting him tip over. Her mix of gentle encouragement and outright orders proved a heady mix, and enough time had passed for him to start reacting to the memory of it.

As much as he wanted to show all the castle idiots this princess no longer bound by expectations, the sight her hovering over him, a dragon hoarding her treasure and making sure he knew it was one he’d jealously fight to keep to himself. “As much as I don’t want to think about it, what are you going to do if one of them tries, y’know…”
“If they proposition me?” She continued his question. “Kija’s a thorny problem. I don’t THINK he’d approach me himself. Shin-ah… I’d almost welcome one, since it would mean he’d progressed in opening up, but that is likely years off. Ryokuryuu, from what I’ve gotten from the dreams, is just as likely to proposition you. More likely, since he’d be trying very hard to distance himself from anything ‘influenced’ by the dragons’ blood. Ouryuu…” She trailed off here.

It had been impossible to maintain complete silence about Zeno, even if she didn’t use his name, at least with Hak. Even more so since he flat out guessed he was the original one. “He very much considers himself still married to his wife. Ouryuu-kami was able to let her soul stay at his side because of that. Not to mention the guilt.”

“Guilt? About what?”

“He never told him. Even on his deathbed, as he begged me—him-me—to tell him what Ouryuu’s power was… he had to discover it himself. Even if—I’ll always have that image in my head. That was one of the biggest regrets, not finding the words to tell him.” She confided to him. “I know it’s completely illogical and everything…”

“It is. But feelings don’t make sense. I’m not sure what I’ll do, when we see him again.” He whispered in her ear as he hugged her tighter. “Now that I’ve processed you wanting both of us.”

“Just because we had been married in our past lives didn’t guarantee we’d even meet. Mother and Father reincarnated several times before their cycles to line up so there was a chance to meet. Being a dragon’s mate improves the odds, but not by a lot.” She explained. “I tried, but…it never felt right, picturing myself with Su-won without you there. I’m not sure how I feel about him now either. Love and betrayal mixed with grief and anger.”

*Dragon’s mate? That sounds familiar…* “I think I’ve heard that term before… yeah, I had dreamed about their first proper kiss and he slipped in to meet me himself… ” Hak said, furrowing his brow as he thought back to what he remembered from that dream. “The traces of the fire from that time resonate with yours and lets Ha-kun reach me…? Something like that.”

Yona closed her eyes, dropping inwards. “…yes…I can feel it… at the time, he hadn’t expected any of his power to transfer, since it was wrapped up so much…”

“What IS a dragon’s mate? Beyond the obvious.” He asked.

“Usually, a dragon would just take human form if a human caught their attention, not actually forsake divinity and become human like him-me had. Their power still fills them, and during intercourse, since blood and emotions run hot and fast, some of that power transfers to the partner. There’s a certain ‘threshold’ of times for a person to become a dragon’s mate.” She sighed. “Him-me hadn’t paid much attention, since he was sure it wouldn’t apply to him, so I don’t know more than that, but I’m reasonably sure that’s why Ouryuu’s wife has been able to stay at his side after death.”

He nipped that spot on her neck, making her moan and distracting her from her thoughts. “Enough serious talk. Let me take care of you…” His hand drifted to her groin, tracing her mound with his fingers.

His other hand caressed her breasts as he rubbed her nub through the cloth. The feeling of cloth rubbing against it felt intense compared to skin, and soon she was panting and writhing against him, biting her hand as to not wake the others.

It hardly felt like any time at all before she peaked, melting against him. “Heavens I’m starting to wonder if you’re remembering anything subconsciously. You wouldn’t go near the red light district
by yourself…” She murmured, pleasantly relaxed and half asleep.

“How couldn’t I have read about it…?” He asked through a yawn, suddenly tired himself.

“Too good…had to have had practice somewhere…” She said as she drifted off, curled up on her side, with him draped over her back, spooning her.

_She has a point…don’t remember hearing about half the things I’ve done with her, even with following her lead and knowledge…_He conceded as he fell asleep himself.

The report and notes Yona had on Earth weren’t as helpful as Su-won would have liked. It flat out stated that without seeing the source rocks from the mines, there was no way of knowing just what other minerals could be mined in place of iron. It said much the same in regards to developing a secondary industry.

While it wasn’t helpful in the ways he’d been hoping it would be, it was a gold mine of information on the vague rumors coming from Awa: human trafficking. Whomever she was getting her information from had tracked everything; which officials were threatened into silence, the ones readily helping Kum-ji in his business, and estimates on the numbers of women and children sold over his tender in Awa. Added with likely values (based on the presumption that every person sold was in good physical condition and a virgin), the amounts of money involved were dizzying. “No wonder he’s been easily meeting his tax obligations compared to the other ports…” He mused.

The real shocker was what Kum-ji was doing with the profits from the human trafficking operation.

Drugs.

There had been reports of drug abuse in Water, but everything thought it was the traditional drugs, and limited in scope.

Not only was the problem not limited, it was a new drug entirely out of the Kai Empire. Her source wasn’t sure if Kai was producing it themselves or if they were one link on the distribution chain, but he had traced the main drug running routes from the dens in Water all the way up to Kum-ji’s operations in Awa. The whole trading fleet of Awa was under his control, and combined with the corruption of the officials, he could lie blatantly on the contents of the ships and get away with it.

The last section dealt with the pirates based out of Awa that were attacking Kum-ji’s ships. No names were given, but everyone had lost someone to Kum-ji, through either death or sale. No wonder the fish trade coming out of Awa was decreased by all accounts; the fishermen were fishing for ships. There was records and estimates of ships and drug cargos lost, and while the losses were minor compared to his overall profit, Kum-ji would not put up with it forever.

Yona’s notes on the pirates debated various solutions, but ultimately decided that giving aid to the pirates, combined with blanket amnesty, was the best option. Having met Kum-ji briefly himself, and instantly disliking him, Su-won found himself reluctantly agreeing with it. The biggest point in favor of blanket amnesty was that the pirates hadn’t outright killed anyone. There were some indications of deaths resulting from injuries sustained in the attacks, but all of those seemed to be because of outside factors like infections.

One line from her source puzzled him.

_Can’t easily make contact with the pirates, since Green would feel me._
Who was ‘Green’, and just what was meant by ‘feel’? His thoughts idling on it, his eyes landed on one of the countless dragons carved and painted all over the castle. The one that caught his attention was part of a mural, and painted in green.

The crimson dragon he saw over Yona’s form the night of her birthday floated before his eyes. “Stop thinking about mythical creatures, Su-won.” He scolded himself.

It didn’t work. *Didn’t the birth myth say that the Dragon Warriors could feel where their fellow warriors were? Could her source really be…?*

Shaking his head, he went to make preparations to go to Awa himself, secretly, with only Ju-do and a couple soldiers. Once he got a feel for what was happening in Awa, he could return via Chi’shin, and see what could be done there.

They reached Awa by midday, and practically the whole group was staring starry-eyed at the ocean. Even Hak, who had seen the ocean before, found himself caught up in everyone else’s awe and excitement. “I think I remember my way around, so let me go reconnoiter today and see where everything is. And see just how brazen the officials act.” Hak declared once they picked a spot to camp. It felt safer to camp outside of town instead of paying money for a hotel room. For all they knew, the hotel staff might be on Kum-ji’s payroll, and would report the presence of a young woman and a pretty boy.

“Please be careful.” Yona reminded him gently as Kija slouched on a tree, dizzy from Ryokuryuu’s rapid position changes, while Shin-ah patted his back and Ao shoved a nut in his mouth. “See if you overhear anything about the pirates. They are the only ones making a dent in Kum-ji’s activities, and even if Ryokuryuu doesn’t come with us, I want Kum-ji out of power.” The embers that now lived in her irises danced as she said this last bit, and Hak nodded in agreement as he left, smirking darkly.

“You’re seriously planning on picking a fight with Kum-ji?! Never mind the bit about teaming up with pirates!!!” Yun exclaimed, inventorying their supplies.

“From what my informant has learned during his visits to Awa, all of the pirates were originally fishermen. But either their family members have been hurt or killed or sold by Kum-ji, or they’ve been put out of business by his fleet. To maintain appearances, all of the ships in Awa are a part of his operation. Makes it easier to hide the illegal products, and to control the town.” She explained. “I don’t know how high up the list his operation would be on the list of problems in the country, and if there is anything we can do while we’re here, then let’s do it.”

Jaeha found himself haunting the crow’s nest that night, as he played his erhu. (Once again, his mind insisted on reminding him that it was the girl’s song). Hakuryuu and Seiryuu were in the vicinity of Awa. At least Ouryuu didn’t seem to be nearby. While he couldn’t feel Ouryuu, he didn’t feel the eyes on him like previous times when he lost track of him. Sighing, he eyed the cliffs above the shoreline, where Hakuryuu and Seiryuu were. “Wonder why they’re not staying in town? Guess he’s a cheapskate, or that arrogant.” It was a struggle to keep his hands unclenched.

It did not matter to him how the other dragons were treated. He’d kick their master out to sea before he’d ever let the dragon’s blood control *his* destiny. “They’re probably no better than puppets anyway.” He told himself, forcing himself to look up at the moon instead of the cliffs.

“You got into some sort of trouble, didn’t you?” Yona whispered to Hak that night, huddled close with Shin-ah the fur ball close by. “And you don’t want Yun to worry.”
“What makes you say that?” He whispered back.

“You were too dodgy.” She replied.

“…hit official…” Shin-ah whispered. “…saved a girl…”

Hak really, really wanted to yell at Shin-ah for revealing that, but he didn’t want to keep him from speaking up either. He guessed Shin-ah was about his age or a little older, but he seemed younger with how timid he was.

Waking Yun and White Snake was secondary. “Yun worries too much.” Hak settled on complaining.

The moon seemed amused, and slightly relieved that he wasn’t yelled at. Smiling to herself, Yona let herself drift off to sleep.

The next morning they set out to Awa together, save for Shin-ah. With or without the mask, he’d be too memorable, and he didn’t seem thrilled about being around so many people. Yona kept half a mind on pulsing comfort to the moon, and a hint of being able to watch them.

Hak decided against separating from the others as they neared town. Yun already seemed suspicious with all his worrying, and while he (reluctantly) trusted White Snake, he didn’t really feel comfortable letting Yona out of his sight for long.

Not after seeing officials boldly grab a girl in broad daylight and everyone averted their eyes.

Kija split off soon after they entered town, trying to track Ryokuryuu. Waiting for Yona and Yun outside a tailor’s, he was practically blitzed by the guy from yesterday, and bundled into a teahouse before he realized it. “Didn’t you hear I was waiting for someone? And why are we here in the middle of the day anyway?” He complained.

“It’s the perfect place to hide!” The foreign-looking guy replied, completely at ease with the women clinging to him. “Not your scene?”

“Not really. No way to make money.” Hak stood to leave.

The women swooned for some reason when he half glared at him, much like the ones at Mistress Sayuri’s place did. The guy enjoying it was new though. “Do me!” He exclaimed, looking far too enthused.

“I didn’t do anything.” Hak complained. “I’ve already got a gorgeous woman in my life.”

“And who might that be?”

“My p—“ Hak caught himself before he finished. Damn this guy makes you chatty. “Anyway, are you from Kouka? The style looks more Kai than anything.”

The guy started a little, like he wasn’t expecting the question. “No, no I’m a local boy. You can get a whole bunch of foreign styles here. Plus they’re more beautiful.” He seemed a little frantic, like he was lying.

They locked eyes, both perfectly aware that the other was hiding something. “Is this really a good place to hide out? Some official could wander in.” Hak finally asked. “Even though they seem to just take what they want…”
“Yan Kum-ji controls the whole town, so naturally they feel they can take anything.” The ‘local boy’ answered. “Not to mention his nasty secret business.”

“Nasty how?” Hak already knew what it was, but perhaps this guy could add something Yona’s informant hadn’t managed to learn.

There wasn’t anything said he didn’t already know, but this guy seemed oddly harsh in his judgment of those who deprived others of their freedoms. “I work as a bodyguard, so—“

“Oh how terrible!” He exclaimed.

“It was my choice, so stop the drama.” Hak said flatly, only to be ignored as the guy proclaimed that he’d understand his choice if he was guarding beautiful ladies like the ones fawning over him. “So what happened to you for you to be fixated on freedom?” Could someone have enslaved him in the past? He speaks Koukan like a native, but…

“RAIJU!!!”

Sticking his head out the window, Hak saw Yun and Yona staring up at him on the street. Yun looked horrified. Yona looked amused…and maybe a little angry…

“What the hell are you doing there?!” Yun exclaimed.

“Hey, don’t jump to the wrong idea! This guy—“ Pointing to where the other guy had been sitting, Hak realized the chair was now empty. “Where’d he go?!“

Rolling his eyes, he leapt down to the street before Yona could get even angrier with him. Once he was on the street, Yona grabbed his coat and dragged him down to kiss him hard. This drew looks of bemusement and horror from those paying attention. “Is this your way of saying I need to try harder?” She whispered when she finally pulled away, looking again like a possessive dragon guarding a hoard, so much so that Hak broke into a cold sweat.

If I meet that guy again I’m killing him.

“What are you guys doing here anyway?” Hak stuttered out, Yona smiling at him serenely in a way that completely terrified him, much as Gramps had been terrified of Cheonsa-sama’s smile.

“You weren’t outside the shop when we came out, and Kija said Ryokuryuu was here. Not that we had any idea that it was a place like THIS…” Yun said flatly.

“A place like this is a good place to get information. Alcohol and pretty women make most men talk.” Yona told him. “Though you could have said something.”

“IT’S NOT WHAT YOU THINK!!!!!” Hak roared. I’m beating that guy to a bloody mess THEN killing him.

“That was a close one.” Jaeha said as he watched his ‘companion’ being scolded by a pretty youth and a cloaked figure. “Wonder if that’s the ‘gorgeous woman’ in his life?” Too bad the hood was up; wouldn’t mind seeing what kind of woman could make a man ignore beauties like in the teahouse…

“Either way, I wonder what that presence I keep feeling with Hakuryuu and Seiryuu is? Not that I care…”

‘So what happened to you for you to be fixated on freedom?’
“Trust me, it’s worse then what Kum-ji’s doing to Awa…and it’s a constant shadow…”

Chapter End Notes

Anyone else feel like they need to have Shin-ah talk so they don’t forget that he’s there?
Yona stuck close to Hak the rest of the day, through the encounter with the girl he had saved with the other bystander the day before. Hak was not reassured, even though she defended him from Yun and Kija. “…how much trouble am I in?” He asked late in the afternoon, when she had hauled him off to sit on the cliffs some distance from camp.

And immediately sat on top of him.

“You’re not in trouble. I know you’re telling the truth; Guen and Shuten and Abi vouch for you.” She told him. “Mostly I’m angry that Yun and Kija would think you’d leave me so readily.”

“…” He wasn’t sure how to respond to this, and just stayed quiet. “So the man who saved the girl with you dragged you in there?” She asked.

“Yeah…completely ignored me when I said I was waiting for someone too.” He complained. “He said someone worse than officials was after him, and he was really hung up on freedom. Might be an escaped slave, but he speaks Koukan like a native…”

“Just because slavery is illegal doesn’t mean everyone will follow the law. Especially if the slaver is powerful enough.” She commented. “Some apprenticeship contracts can be like legal slavery, and since a child can be apprenticed at six…”

“I’d say he was a few years older than me.” He added. “But seriously, explain to me why the women in the teahouses swoon when I half glare at them. The guy seemed interested too…”

“It’s the piercing gaze.” She turned to look him in the eyes. “Dark and mysterious…very alpha male.”

“Is that right?” He asked with a smirk. “Except this alpha male is part of a dragon’s hoard, and very much knows it.”

“I’m not sure where people came up with the whole hoarding thing. I know dragons are possessive, but still why gather up a bunch of gold and jewels and treasures? It’s not like they can really stay in this plane of existence for all that long, even by human standards.” She complained.

“Dragons are like crows and like shiny things?” This remark got him an elbow to his stomach. “Might be a thing from beyond Kai and the Steppe People.” He suggested with a shrug.

“Oi you two, cut the pillow talk and come eat.” Yun called over to them.

Before coming back, he had splurged and gotten some sweets he knew Yona liked. Call it genius intuition, but he had a feeling she was more angry with him and Kija for thinking Raiju would leave her for another woman. Kija had been pale the whole way back to camp. “It’s like she’s trying not to be angry, but it’s still leaking through…” He had said.

“When she kissed him after we found him, I almost expected to see ‘Property of Crown Princess Yona’ on his face or something.” Yun commented back.

“I know they’re in love and very close to each other and have known each other most of their lives,
but I can’t help feeling jealous of their bond.” Kija confided quietly over the dinner prep.

Shin-ah had just tilted his head. “?” He made a questioning noise as he absently stopped Ao from diving into the pot.

“It’s one thing to share her with my dragon brothers, but…” Kija’s face flushed red. “My heart acts all funny when she smiles and while the warmth from the torch when they’re doing…things…is nice, I kind of wish I was the one responsible…”

“Yeah, but how much is the dragon’s blood and how much is you? I mean, are they any stories in your village of Hiryuu-ou being close to his warriors that way?” Yun asked.

Guen made a face. “He was practically my kid brother. I’ll never forget how when he woke up with his first morning wood he asked me to show him how to ‘stimulate it’. Not to mention how he just *had* to ask why it was called ‘seed’ when it doesn’t look like other seeds in front of the whole garrison…”

Shuten howled. “Given how possessive his wife was, I doubt she’d have tolerated it. Plus he was too naïve. And guys just don’t do it for me.”

“I never particularly cared either way.” Abi said dryly.

Yun eyed the spot to his left out of the corner of his eye. It seemed like there were three translucent figures standing there. He could hear their voices clearly, but their forms were like seeing them through the summer heat haze. *Whomever they are, they’re connected to Hiryuu-ou, meaning that they might be the spirits of the first Dragon Warriors. Were they the ones Yona had been talking to that one night? But she never reacts to them in the group, and if Raiju, Kija, and Shin-ah are seeing and hearing them too, they’re not reacting either.* With a mental sigh, he refocused on Kija’s babbling as a brawl appeared to break out among the trio. It seemed like one took offense at being called a prude by another, and the third joined in for the hell of it.

“…there’s nothing like that in the village library, but it’s not like it would be outright stated, would it?” Kija ended his babbling a little less red.

“…hers…doesn’t matter…beyond that…” Shin-ah stated calmly. He was content to bask in the warmth from her torch. As much as she called him her light in the dark, he felt like it was she who was the light in the dark, pulling him out of his dark little corner out into a world of light and colors.

Kija didn’t seem very happy, but let the matter drop as Yun called the lovebirds back over for dinner.

Waking up in the middle of the night, Hak couldn’t help noticing how White Snake and Shin-ah seemed to gravitate to Yona in their sleep. When either of them was in the tent, they’d end up pressed against the cloth, nearly coming out the side closest to Yona. It seemed to go both ways too, as Yona grew less restless in her sleep the closer the dragons were.

Something floated up from the depths of ancient memory, of how Hiryuu was so touchy-feely with his dragons. If everyone had gotten along enough, he’d probably have insisted on a big happy dragon pile whenever he could have gotten away with it. Ha-kun hadn’t been able to stop all her jealousy at the bond they shared, as much as her head realized that nothing of the sort was going on and really, wasn’t she lucky enough that she was married to the rarest of all creatures, a one-woman man?

The issue of just how he felt about her getting sexually involved with one of the dragons was just too thorny a question for him to deal with at this hour of the night. Not to mention it had barely been two
months since everything fell apart around them.

Shoving it away, Hak drifted back to sleep, willing himself not to think about the last person he thought he could have trusted with her that way.

(It didn’t work, and his dreams were full of blood and death, and not necessarily the blood and death of the one who deserved it.)

Jaeha spent a restless night mostly staring at the wall of his cabin in the direction of the others. The throbbing in his dragon leg morphed from being an idle discomfort to something closer to actual pain, the leg fever hot compared to the rest of his body. He even had to resort to sticking his dragon leg out of the bedding, uncovered and unhidden, to get any sort of relief.

Despite himself, he found himself conjuring up images of the others. It was said that Seiryuu’s eyes were the most beautiful in the world, and he had to wonder if that would apply to the rest of Seiryuu’s face and body. Did he walk around with his eyes uncovered, or did he hide them away? Did Hakuryuu take great pains to hide his dragon arm from view the way he did with his leg, or did he leave it on display for all to see? Just what did Ouryuu’s power look like? ‘Invulnerable body’ didn’t really indicate what that would look like. Was he some kind of human/dragon chimera, or just a person covered in scales?

And what of his ‘master’, Hiryuu-ou reborn? The crimson hair was a given, much as the hair of the Four Dragon Warriors reflected the dragon that cursed their lines. He couldn’t help grimacing as he pictured Kum-ji, but with crimson hair. “So not beautiful.” He muttered.

Thinking of Hiryuu-ou led his thoughts back to the girl from the dreams, with her bright crimson hair and ancient eyes. Petite and cute, but completely not real. Sighing, Jaeha rolled over determinedly to face away from the others and pulled the covers over his head. Hopefully Hakuryuu and Seiryuu would get the message and move on and leave him alone soon.

“Are you alright Hak?” Yona asked the next morning, after Yun convinced them, despite her better judgment, that it was better not to get involved with whatever the officials were doing, wrecking that shop. “You keep shivering.”

“Keep feeling like someone is walking over my grave or something.” He replied. Hell, given how the location of Hiryuu’s tomb was a question of tradition and not history, someone could be walking over Ha-kun’s grave right then for all he knew. Her name didn’t even survive to the present, so it was doubtful her tomb would have survived intact.

Catching sight of the notice board, he said quickly, “I’ll go look at weapons while you three keep looking for Ryokuryuu.” He darted off before the others could say anything.

Noticing the notice board himself, Kija had to bite back a snicker. “He could have just told us that people were looking for him.” Yun complained as he took in the poorly drawn yet still recognizable poster of Hak.

“This is getting ridiculous.” Shuten complained to Zeno, watching Jaeha hitting on Hak from a nearby roof. “And does he really need to make it sound like a sex invite?”

“It’s your descendant, so you tell Zeno.” He retorted.

Zeno had to frantically slide down out of view when Jaeha leapt onto the same roof to avoid Kija.
“You’d think Ryokuryuu would have a better strategy than leaping out of sight.” Zeno couldn’t help commenting.

“Says the only dragon to live long enough to figure out how to hide his presence from the others. And people don’t usually look up.” Shuten reminded him, poking a tile near Jaeha’s foot with his spear.

Zeno risked a peek after the sound of something cracking was followed by the sounds of someone falling off the roof. “That is too funny.” He snickered at the dumbfounded looks on the faces of both Kija and Jaeha as they stared at each other, Jaeha stuck practically sitting in a large pot.

Narrowing his eyes, he turned and looked at Shuten. “…you did something to the tile, didn’t you?” He accused.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Shuten replied blandly.

“Zeno knows you’re lying.”

“And just what are you going to do about it? You’re still alive and we’re in the middle of town.” Shuten taunted.

Zeno smirked. “It’s the miss’s and mister’s night for the tent. We can sit on you while Kaya tickles you.”

Shuten swore a blue streak while Zeno started working his way across the roofs to where he had caught a glimpse of Hak and Yona.

Hak ushered Yona out of the wrecked shop while Yun tended to the parents of the dead child. Slipping into a gap between buildings, she cried into his chest as he held her close. “I’m just as powerless as ever. Even more so, since I can’t even attempt to order anyone to do something.” She whispered. “Is there really nothing I could have done?”

“I’m not willing to trust that he doesn’t want you dead. Drawing the attention of the officials means drawing the attention of Kum-ji, and that could bring attention from the ranks above him. We don’t know what the standing orders would be if we’re found, but I’m certain that while you’d likely be kept alive for a little bit, I wouldn’t.” He told her bluntly. “The best way I can put is like with bow training. Do you stop practicing because your arms start hurting?”

She shook her head. “You keep going, because in the end you’ll be stronger than if you stop every time it starts hurting.”

“That’s right. You can’t stop your arms hurting when you practice, much like how you couldn’t help the child. But you can push through it, and use it to become stronger, until it takes a lot for it to hurt. Hold his memory in your heart, and let it help you become strong enough to save the next person you come across in distress.” He told her, rubbing her back as she calmed down.

Finally she was able to walk back onto the street. As he started subtly leading her in the direction opposite from the shop, the notice board caught her eye again.

“Hey, Hak?” Yona asked, staring at the wanted poster. “This guy…does he have green hair?”

“Yeah.” Realizing what it could imply, Hak groaned. “Don’t tell me…I didn’t want anything more to do with him!”
“I won’t know for sure until I meet him but…the way he keeps disappearing from areas Kija says Ryokuryuu is…and you did say he seems hung up on freedom?” Hak nodded. “Either way we can’t keep chasing Ryokuryuu all over Awa. So…” She eyed Hak. “Bait?”

When Jaeha said he was a pirate, Hak knew they were stuck with him for at least a few more days, given how Yona wanted to team up with the pirates to deal with Kum-ji. “He can’t realize he’s been baited.” She had said beforehand. “He’s flighty enough without making him feel like we’re trapping him.”

“So, my captain would like you to help us—“

“No.” Hak said flatly.

“Your master can come with—“

“Even bigger no.” Even if these guys were pirates just to fight Kum-ji, he didn’t really want Yona near them, no matter what she wanted.

He just wished she’d hurry up with it already.

“Your master must be important to you.” Jaeha commented. “Don’t worry—“

“Sorry for making you wait, Hak.” A pulse traveled through Jaeha’s soul at the voice.

Turning, he saw a girl in a cloak standing behind him. “Hello.” She greeted him with a smile.

It was the girl from the dreams.

At about the same time he realized this, the crimson hair contrasting the tan of the cloak’s hood registered fully, and a wave of heat came over him. Falling to a knee, Jaeha fought the urge to grab his leg, gritting his teeth as the voice filled him and his blood boiled.

“Oi, you okay?” Hak asked. Given the sweat now beading Jaeha’s forehead, he figured she had been right.

He really needed to get used to that.

“Are you alright?” Yona asked concerned, placing her hand on Jaeha’s forehead.

This is the Four Dragons’ master? He stared at her in disbelief. He never believed the girl he would dream of was actually the Four Dragons’ master; just his mind making up a master he wouldn’t hate. Either way, he still needed to get out of there and away from her.

At least, that’s what his head was saying. Why can’t I pull away? I’ve encountered what I have always run from…so why can’t I move?

“Ryokuryuu?” He started as she said that.

“You sure?” Hak knew she was, but the charade was still on.

“I just have this feeling…and I don’t think I’m wrong.” She answered in keeping with the ruse, quietly relieved to find the intense heat rising from Ryokuryuu’s forehead lessening.

Shit, divert! “What are you talking about?” Jaeha asked, somehow pulling away from her hand and standing. “I’m just—“
“Hime-sama, he’s Ryokuryuu!”

*Damn Hakuryuu!* He thought as Hak put him in a chokehold. “Just what?”

“…Ryokuryuu.” He conceded, rubbing his neck and coughing as Hak released him.

“I already wanted to meet you after hearing how you helped save the girl with Hak and seeing you in the wanted poster next to Hak, so I’m glad you turned out to be Ryokuryuu.” Yona said, smiling.

He had Shuten’s eyes. “My name is Yona. And you are?”

Clearly he had underestimated the power of the blood vow. A torch now lived inside his heart in a space that he hadn’t realized was empty until it was filled, a brilliant flame connected to the girl before him. It flared with joy and hope. Those feelings, added to the allure of her voice and presence, had him ready to give himself over to her. Yet he knew that everything drawing him to her had nothing to do with him. “My name is Jaeha. And I sincerely did not want to meet you.”

“You knew I was coming?”

“Well I didn’t know you’d be such a cute girl—“ A blatant lie, but she didn’t call him on it. “—but I felt Hakuryuu and Seiryuu in town, and I’ve always known what I’d say if they turned up with their master in tow. ‘I have no wish to serve you. Please leave.’”

Yona could feel him fighting the dragon’s blood. “I can’t deny the bond between the dragons and myself, as it seems to go both ways for this generation, but I’d hardly call myself their master. They agreed to help me, and that’s what I’ve come to ask of you.”

“Normally I’d be flattered that a cute girl wanted my help.” Jaeha admitted. “But I’m not like Hakuryuu—“ (the tamed wolf bristled) “—but I have no intention of living or dying for Hiryuu. I’ll live how I wish, protect who I wish, and die the way I choose to.”

His tone and face was mild, but no one could miss the edge hidden inside.

“Jaeha,” Yona said gently. “You don’t have to intimidate me into leaving. It’s alright.”

Jaeha stared at her, shocked. He hadn’t been aiming for intimidation, at least intentionally. But with the Dragons’ Master being a girl, it wasn’t like he could get away with kicking her all the way out of town.

“…I understand.” She said quietly, the torch dimming with resignation. “I won’t ask you to come with us.” The wild cat that was Jaeha was sitting stubbornly as far away from the other three as it could get.

It would be painful leaving him behind, but it would hurt more to force him to follow the dragon’s blood when he was so set against it.

“You’re giving up rather easily.” Jaeha commented, surprised.

“It would be rude to force the issue when you are so steadfast in your resolve. While bearing the dragon’s blood was not your choice, I do not want to take away any chance for the dragons to decide their own fate.” She explained, her eyes looking old and her torch flaring with truth.

“I will admit that I’m disappointed.” She continued with a grimace. “With each dragon I meet, it gets harder and harder to walk away from any of them. “
“I’m a bit disappointed too.” Jaeha conceded. “You’re the cutest girl I’ve seen in a while. And—“
He leaned in close to Hak’s face, examining him. “—I wanted him to team up with me.”

“It’s rude to force the issue.” Hak flatly repeated Yona’s words.

“Why Hak?” She asked with a blink.

“He’s a pirate and trying to get me to meet his captain.” Hak answered.

“Hmmm….” She hummed, Kija and Yun (and Zeno) watching the byplay. “Jaeha, I’d like to meet with your captain.”

“Oh? You’re letting us have him?” Jaeha asked.

The torch flared high, sparking possessiveness, while she shook her head fiercely. “No way!”

Calming, she continued. “You’re the pirates fighting Yan Kum-ji, correct?” Jaeha nodded, wondering where she was going with this. “…I saw an official kill a child, powerless to stop it. My being rages at everything; the official, Kum-ji, and myself. I do not want to have to stand by and watch as another child is killed, or another woman sold, or one more shipment of drugs enters Water to spread its poison. Is…there anything I can do to help in your fight?”

Even without the torch, Jaeha could tell that she was sincere. “Setting aside the question of me joining you…if you bring Hak, I’ll let you meet with my captain. You can meet us at the ship tomorrow morning. I doubt you’ll have any trouble finding it.” He conceded, knowing Hakuryuu could follow his presence right to the ship.

Somehow, the promise of meeting in the morning and the torch warming his heart let Jaeha turn and walk away at a normal pace. It took more effort than he thought to not look back. Out of sight of the group, he leapt onto a roof, sprawling on the sun-warmed tiles. “Jaeha you idiot…you should have bolted when you heard her voice and not looked back…” He scolded himself.

About the only positive thing was if nothing else, they’d get an experienced fighter to join them. The throbbing pain in his leg faded away when his blood boiled, leaving behind lingering heat. “So that’s his ‘gorgeous woman’?” He chuckled to himself, somewhat bitter. “Figures…”

Forcing himself to stand, he very deliberately kicked off hard, so he could reach the ship in one stride. He might find himself detouring if he made multiple leaps.

Chapter End Notes

Why do I bother asking questions in the notes if no one answers me?? Never mind, you all will just ignore me...
“Are you alright Kija?” Yona asked Kija as they walked back to camp. He seemed distracted by something.

“…is it really that bad, that I’ve embraced the dragon’s blood and my inherited legacy so fully?” He asked quietly. “I always thought that the other dragons were eagerly waiting, like I and my forefathers had, but Shin-ah’s clan lost their heritage generations ago, and Ryo-Jaeha views the dragon’s blood as a curse…”

“Your village is the only one that has been in the same spot since the days of myth. Seiryuu and Ryokuryuu Villages have likely moved several times, probably because outsiders came for the dragons. As much as I despise the actions of Shin-ah’s village, in the context of their fear and ignorance, their actions make sense. It seems that while Jaeha’s village didn’t lose their heritage, their actions trying to keep the Ryokuryuu safe from those who would misuse the power of the dragons did not make for a positive experience.” She said, frowning a little. “Even in the birth myth, Ryokuryuu is described as the most free-spirited, and I doubt the idea of serving a person you’ve never met is an appealing one to them.”

“I suppose…” He conceded. “He compared me to a puppet.”

“That was a low blow.” Shuten conceded. “Your preaching about the brotherhood of the dragons always pissed me off Guen, but I knew it was as much from your personal loyalty to the royal idiot as from the blood.”

“What a remarkably mature view.” Abi deadpanned, which triggered the afternoon fight.

Yun caught Hak’s smirk, but he wasn’t sure if he was smirking because of the spirits or because of something in his head.

“The two of you are at opposite extremes, regarding how you view the Four Dragon Warriors.” Yona just said diplomatically.

Yona sat on the cliff overlooking the ocean, hand pressed to her heart. Even with the wild cat that was Jaeha straining away from the others, just feeling everyone inside had her feeling a little giddy. “I wonder if I could get everyone into one big cuddle pile at some point?” She wondered out loud. “Nah, Hak wouldn’t trust Jaeha.”

“Can’t really stop you if you want to have a big happy dragon pile, as long as I get to join.” He answered, walking over to join her. “You’re quite willing to let him walk away without a fight. Aren’t I special.” He commented sarcastically.

“I haven’t known Jaeha my whole life, and I haven’t just lost everything and most everyone.” She replied simply. “Only trouble would be getting Yun to join in. Wouldn’t be fair to leave him out, and he worries too much.”

“He’s gonna die of old age at thirty if he keeps it up.”

“Stop being a bunch of idiots and I’ll live longer.” Yun called over. “I worry so much because none of you worry enough.”

Hak debated comparing Yun to a mother, but since he seemed on edge about something (probably
meeting the pirates tomorrow), he let it be. Dinner was almost ready, and he didn’t put it past Yun to do something to his portion.

“So how come he didn’t insist on a dragon pile back then?” Hak whispered to Yona later in the tent. Neither had felt inclined to play, and it was more fun listening to Shuten getting ‘punished’ for lying than actually doing something. “Wasn’t he kinda touchy-feely?”

“At first, everyone was so busy expanding and enforcing the borders that there wasn’t time for everyone to really get to know each other. By the time he felt he could have insisted on one without bloodshed, he had married Ha-kun.” She whispered back. “He was very naïve, but still realized the kind of talk five grown men in a cuddle pile could generate. He…respected her far too much, as a warrior, as a person, and as his consort to hurt her like that.”

She rolled over to look him in the eyes. “Did you remember something?”

“…nothing major, but she did try not to be jealous, and it wasn’t like she could have stopped him.” He admitted, shifting a little. “Like, it should have been enough for him to be a one-woman man, even though she knew nothing was happening.”

“He never cared to observe the red light districts before descending, since they just felt…wrong… and Father—past Father—had been completely faithful to past-Mother, despite her inability to bear him a child that would survive the first year. He was influenced a lot by them. It’s part of why he was reborn now. It was the first time their reincarnation cycles matched up to where they could meet and marry.” Her eyes were distant. “He was…with past-Mother when she died, and he promised her that in the next life, he would be their child by blood, not just by heart.”

“Like I said, I couldn’t stop you if that was what you wanted. You seem kind of sure Droopy Eyes will come with us.” He commented.

“Not really sure, but…I can feel how hard he’s fighting the pull. He can’t stay away forever. I just need to wait for it to be his choice to join us.”

Something about this last statement bothered Hak. “Is it hurting you, for him to be pulling away?” He demanded sharply.

Yona shook her head. “No—the best I can compare it to is like wearing shoes just a little bit off. You notice it, but it’s not actual discomfort or pain.”

“But it could turn into pain.”

“Probably. But you are not telling him, or the others.” She ordered. “I will be fine. If we leave Awa without him, and I start hurting, I’ll tell you, and then you can tell the others and go beat him up and haul him back. It’s a little manipulative, but the more we’re in each other’s presence, the tighter the bond and the harder it is to fight.”

He wasn’t happy, but he demurred to her order. “Have you noticed how White Snake and Shin-ah seem to draw closer to you in their sleep? You get less restless as they get closer too.”

She blinked, surprised. “No I hadn’t. Guess it make sense, with the bond being two-way in this life.” She ran a hand down his chest. “Enough about things outside the tent. I changed my mind, if you’re up for it.”

He rolled them so she was laying underneath him. “That’s a very stupid thing to ask, Hime-san. I’ll always be up for it.”
She could feel his growing hardness against her mound. “One, that’s a terrible pun, and two, you are allowed to say no, and I’ll entertain myself.”

He ghosted his lips over her neck. “Watching you entertain yourself would very quickly change my mind.” He moved to kiss her lips as he thumbed at a nipple through her dress, and she moaned into his mouth.

She slid her hands inside his robes to cling to his shoulders, digging her nails in the way he liked as he continued stoking a fire that had nothing to do with her innate nature and everything to do with him.

Jaeha scowled at the wall. “I really underestimated the dragon’s blood.” He muttered.

The torch that was Yona flared up with arousal and desire, and even this faintest echo left him reeling and aching. “He’s probably fucking her.” He complained, too worked up to avoid using such an unbeautiful word out loud. “Not that I would want to…”

Screw it, he would want to. Either Yona, or Hak, or Yona and Hak. Personally he felt Hak may have been overstating the ‘gorgeous’ part, but then again, it wasn’t like he had ever seen her in the throes of passion. She was pale enough that she’d likely blush all over, and all too easily he could see the pair of them, Hak smirked darkly over her shoulder as he took her from behind, seating her in his lap as hands played with her nipples and clit. Her head was thrown back against his shoulder as she writhed in Hak’s lap, grabbing his own hair and—

“Damn…” Jaeha ran his fingers through his hair roughly. “Think about Hakuryuu; he’s safer, right? Pretty enough…be even prettier with a gag so he couldn’t babble about the sacred dragon brotherhood…”

Then again, with that dragon arm he’d overpower me, since the only thing that could keep him pinned would be my leg…too bad I didn’t meet Seiryuu; wonder if the paralysis is just for movement or if it includes sensation…

The torch flared impossibly strong as what had to have been her climax hit, dying down to languid contentment and drowsiness. “That’s all very well and good for *you*…” He muttered with a scowl.

He, on the other hand, was still very much aroused, and too keyed up to try ignoring it away. Taking himself in hand, Jaeha forced himself to focus on the physical sensations, trying to keep his mind away from dangerous territory.

He failed miserably, and came with his head filled of images of crimson and fire, his climax hitting harder than it had in years.

Strangely worn out, he couldn’t bring himself to care that he was facing where the other dragons were, nearly falling out of hammock doing so as he drifted to sleep.

Yona eyed the ledge leading to where the senju herb was and tried to swallow her heart back down where it belonged. She was dimly aware of Jaeha speaking, the reassurance in his tone at odds with the worry the wild cat was trying to hide. Smacking her cheeks to focus on the task at hand, she edged out onto the ledge.

Having all of her dragons in her heart meant she now had some sense of direction for each of them. Jaeha was directly behind her, Kija and Shin-ah were in the direction she thought Captain Gi-Gan’s ship was, and Zeno was overhead. You can do this…this is perfect for my small body…just have to
A gust of wind had her stepping back half a step, sending a small rock off the ledge. She then made
the mistake she had been telling herself not to do.

Don’t look down.

She just trembled, unable to move forward or back as Jaeha tried to convince her to give up and
come back. The vehemence of the wild cat convinced her that she had to keep moving forward. To help others, I need to be able to help myself. And to help myself, I have to do this. “I’m…not…
turning back…” She said through her tears.

The wild cat just gave her a look that said she was crazy as she convinced herself to keep moving. Somehow, even with her legs trembling, she was able to inch forward little by little. “Are you that scared of losing someone?” Jaeha asked.

“It’s what I fear the most. In the same vein, I don’t want to see anyone weeping over losing someone ever again.” She answered.

Closing her eyes, she could see her/his father’s body dead on the floor, as clear as if they was still in that moment. “At least it’s medicine I’m going for. Anything that could help everyone if they were hurt…even if there were arrows coming at me from all sides, I’d still go.”

There was a sense that the wild cat thought she was an idiot. Nothing new there.

About three quarters of the way to the corner of the cliff, Yona realized something. “Jaeha?”

“Hm?”

“Are you following me?”

She didn’t need to look back to know that he hadn’t realized he’d been following her. “Just… halfway. Y’know…surveillance.” Jaeha answered, trying to laugh it off.

She looked back over her shoulder (the one not facing the endless abyss) with a smile. “Thank you.”

Jaeha looked away, the hint of a blush on his cheeks. “I’m not helping you.”

“I know, and I won’t ask you to. But…knowing you’re physically close by, not just in my heart… it’s helping me stay calm…”

“Wait, you can feel the dragons?” He asked.

“Once I meet each dragon, I can feel them in my heart. I think it’s because in this generation, the awakening happens when we meet face to face.” She replied, finding the remaining quarter up to the turn easier with something to distract her a little from the abyss. “Kija feels like a tamed wolf, Shin-ah like the moon, and you’re like a wild cat.”

He didn’t response to this bit of information. “It’s too narrow for me to go any farther.” Was all he said as she rounded the corner, Ao scampering ahead to the small opening that lead to the senju herb.

Hak couldn’t disguise his relief at seeing Yona safe on dry land. Part of him wished she had failed, if only so he’d have an excuse to keep her out of the fight to come, but that was overwhelmed with the pride he felt. Even if he had been small enough to creep along that ledge, he didn’t think he could have done so. “So that’s what you look like when she’s involved.” The Ryokuryuu, Jaeha
“You’re one to talk; you look like you’ve gained a decade.” Hak snarked in reply, causing Jaeha to whip out a hand mirror to see if he was telling the truth.

“This whole experience was exhausting! Can’t picture what it would be like as her bodyguard.” Jaeha admitted. “She just refused to back down! Sure, she pure-hearted and stubborn, but now she’s swaying on her feet! Making her annoying and a burden.”

“You’re not wrong. We’re childhood friends; stunts like this are almost expected.” Hak was forced to concede, thinking back. Even if sneaking out of the castle was innocent compared to this.

“Lovers?” Jaeha knew Yona had been doing something sexual the night before, and while it was going out on a limb, her possessiveness yesterday had him thinking he was on the money.

“Not quite. Not that it’s your business. Either way, she’s important to me, and I’ve been entrusted with her safety.” Hak couldn’t help glaring at Jaeha, metaphorical haunches raised.

“Is that all?” Jaeha commented idly. “You two seem a little distant…”

Scowling, Hak stalked over to Yona, sweeping her up in his arms as her legs gave out. “HAK! I can walk myself!” She yelled, but nonetheless let herself sink into his arms.

“The adrenaline’s gone, so you’re gonna crash.” He replied, glancing to where she cradled her hands to her chest. “Not to mention that if we don’t clean your hands and get the thorns out, they could rot off by morning.”

“NO THEY WON’T!” She smacked his chest, wincing as the action drove a thorn in deeper. Hak smirked but said nothing as they walked past Jaeha. The torch does seem warmer when they’re together… He conceded, following them back to the ship.

“He didn’t even realize he was following me on the ledge.” She whispered to Hak. “He was like a cat caught flatfooted when he realized it.”

“Keep talking about another man and I might drop you.” He hissed. Are we distant from each other?

“No you won’t. Because that would give another man the chance to sweep me off my feet.” She countered. “I thought you were staying annoying close for the rest of our lives?”

“True enough.”

Yun somehow contained his knowing smirk as he handed Hak the honey he asked for with the wash bowl and cloth. Watching him retreat with Yona to a discreet spot, he just sighed, turning back to the ingredients he had at hand. Hope there’s enough to satisfy a group of hungry pirates and dragons… eh, I’ll just make them get more if I run out.

Satisfied with that decision, Yun started preparing what he was thinking of as ‘pirate stew’.

“I am not looking forward to traveling with him.” Hak complained quietly as he helped Yona clean her hands before using the honey. “But if it’ll hurt you for him to stay away, I’ll have no choice.”

“The egos of the budding tribes had been far easier to handle.” Yona admitted, watching the swirl of blood in the water. “And we’re talking about groups that had clans feuding with each other and...
“I’d accuse you of joking, but I know how petty people can be when it comes to clan honor and all that.” Drying her hands as gently as he could, Hak began pouring the honey on her palms.

She relished in how the honey seemed to soothe her scrapes from clinging to the rocks, despite the stickiness. “How long does it take for the thorns to work themselves out?” She asked.

“Depends on how long and big the thorns are.” He replied.

“They weren’t very big, but there was a lot of them.” She stared at her hands in his, not really seeing them. “I hope… I’m closer to being able to stand at your side in battle…”

He nearly dropped the whole container of honey with that statement. Her eyes met his, and he was caught up in how breathtaking she looked. “I know you want me wrapped up in silk, but that’s not something I can afford to permit. The best way to keep each other alive is if I can stand with you in battle one day. And…” She looked down. “…the bond they had had, fighting next to each other… I’d like to experience that myself, with you.”

This confession sparked a memory in Hak. Well, not quite a memory, but of the thrill of fighting alongside a husband that didn’t treat her as incapable, letting herself place her faith in his ability to protect her if needed the way he did with her.

With that came a flash of what was definitely a memory. She loved when he was like this, like the dragon he had been, taking her roughly and fast when they were both keyed up from fighting and the thrill of surviving and yes, she liked the gentle worship but the marks he left behind after times like this gave her a thrill as great as the fighting and—

“The honey!” Yona exclaimed, jolting Hak from the memory.

He had poured too much honey, and now it spilled out of her hands and down her arms. Setting the jar down (not noticing or caring that Ao immediately begun gorging herself on the remainder), he caught her eye. Without saying a word, he lifted her arm to his mouth and began licking off the honey.

Yona felt herself blush, heat gathering in her breasts and mound as he held her gaze as he licked. It was crazy, the fire simmering just from him licking honey off her arm.

_They’re not even that sensitive!_

_Almight, two thirds of what I’m reacting to is the way he’s looking at me…_ She admitted to herself. She wasn’t sure, but it almost seemed like there was a dark fire trying to spark to life.

All too soon, the spilled honey was licked up. Not caring about the honey still on her palms, she grabbed his coat and pulled him into a hungry kiss. Dimly conscious of placing her hands back in the water to start rinsing the thorn-riddled honey off, she couldn’t quite contain her moan as he did something with his tongue that always made her shiver.

A blast of cold forced them to part. Shuten sat disturbingly close. “Food’s ready. Man, I wish I was still alive so I could eat the kid’s cooking.”

 “…at least it wasn’t Kija? Or Jaeha?” She assured Hak tentatively as Shuten sauntered away, whistling (or trying to).
Yun’s cooking was met with marriage proposals from the pirates. “No way! I don’t go for jobless bums.” He declined, sticking his tongue out. “Did you two use all the honey?” He directed at Yona.

“Ao got a hold of it, sorry.” Hak admitted, not very sorry.

And very, very distracted by the noises Yona was making as she enjoyed the seafood. She had eaten seafood at times before, but King Il had a tendency to break out in hives if he ate certain types of seafood, so it was limited to fish.

Yun scowled, but was diverted by Kija encountering crab for the first time. “What kind of bug is this?!”

“It’s a crab, not a bug. Why can’t you be like Shin-ah and Pukyuu and eat what’s placed in front of you without complaint?” He pointed at the pair, already on their second bowl.

Yona hid her smile behind her bowl. The relish with which Ao enjoyed food squirrels didn’t generally eat betrayed her origins. *If there’s any indication that the Dragon’s Eyes aren’t a curse, then it’s how a nature spirit willingly associates with Shin-ah…*

Finishing up, she brought a serving to Captain Gi-Gan, who hadn’t joined the others, contemplating the harbor. “If you don’t get some now there won’t be any left.” She commented, passing her the bowl. “Yun’s the best cook I’ve ever encountered.”

“Hopefully you can pick up some tips before you marry.” Gi-Gan said as she began eating.

“I’ve been learning a little, but he’s very possessive of his ‘kitchen’.” Yona replied. “Is everyone doing alright?”

“Yes; the senju herb has helped my wounded get back on their feet. Hopefully there won’t be many more battles before we stop Kum-ji.”

“…how many have you lost?” Yona asked quietly.

“Twelve. Plus five who won’t be able to go back to being fishermen when this is all over. I want to disband the crew once this is over, but I have one problem child.” Gi-Gan answered. “Jaeha is still clinging to the apron strings. Will you take him with you, when you leave?”

“He’s already said he doesn’t want to come with me, and I’m not going to force that.” Yona declined. “I’m not going to force anyone to follow me.”

“Now why would I want to travel with a group of guys, even if they are beautiful?” Jaeha commented from above. “Now if it was just me and Yona-chan—“ He leapt down to their level. “I’d consider it, but not now. Bit too young.”

Yona raised an eyebrow. “Are you worried that you’ll be too old to keep up with me? Or do you fear your performance would suffer around so many young people?” She posed smoothly, brushing past Jaeha to look back with a heated look. “Now if you were up to sharing…perhaps I could be persuaded to defer to experience…”

Gi-Gan barked out a laugh at the look on Jaeha’s face. “She’s got too much fire for you! Never seen a girl response like that!”

“Hime-san, try not to scare off the voice of experience.” Hak called over.

Yona had whispered to him how she planned to rile Jaeha up, and while he was not happy with what
was being implied, anything that caught Droopy Eyes off guard was fine with him. “His old heart might give out.”

Zeno nearly killed himself trying not to laugh from his ‘hidden’ perch in the crow’s nest. *Looks like Ryokuryuu-chan might have met his match…* Kaya was slumping against him, giggling helplessly.

Meanwhile, Guen and Shuten were clinging to each other, trying to stay standing up. “The look on his face—“ Guen cackled, dodging a half-hearted kick from Shuten, who also found the look on Jaeha’ face at being called old hilarious, but still feeling he needed to mount some defense of his successor.

Abi just sighed, concealing his smile in his hand.
Jaeha’s brain froze, stuck on what Yona was implying. Then he realized he had been called old. “I’m twenty-five! That’s not old!” He exclaimed, vaguely panicked. *Twenty-five really isn’t old…is it?* Even with the likelihood of his successor being conceived or born any day, and with less than a decade left to live…

“Yeah it is when the average age of the group is seventeen.” Hak pointed out.

The torture Jaeha session was canceled when Shin-ah suddenly stood and walked to the rail. “…ships gathering…”

“How many?” Gi-Gan demanded.

“…seven…” Shin-ah replied. “Full of armed men.”

“Gather around boys. This will be the big one.” Gi-Gan commanded, leading the way into the ship’s common room, with a map of Awa and the nearby regions spread on the table. “With that many ships, he has to be making a major deal in regards to human trafficking with his clients in the Kai Empire.” She began.

“That’s where the drugs behind the outbreak in Water are coming from, but I don’t know if that’s the origin point or just one more link in the distribution chain.” Yona added, tracing the drug route down into Water.

Hiding her shock at Yona’s information, Gi-Gan continued. “With how he’s been building up his military strength over the years, he’s probably hoping to crush us pirates once and for all. But we’ll have to wait until his fleet leaves the harbor to attack, or the citizens of Awa will be caught up in the cross-fire, which won’t win us any favors.”

“We still need to learn when he’ll be making the deal and which ship will have the girls on board. With a deal this big, he’ll be sure to attend in person.” Jaeha added.

“True, otherwise the girls will be used as hostages. We can’t attack ships at random either if we don’t know which ship they’re on.” Gi-Gan agreed.

“Too many people have been sold to Kai as it stands now. Is there any way we can recover them safely?” Yona asked, the seed of an idea planted.

“We need more information. This is the perfect opportunity for us to stop Kum-ji for good and free Awa from him and his corrupt officials.” Grabbing a dagger, Gi-Gan stabbed it into the map at the likely meeting point. “I’ll be right in the middle of things with you boys. So follow me to the end of the line!”
Yona smiled faintly at the boisterous group before her as they began talking and planning. *I’ll propose my idea tomorrow. I want to see the real Awa, where people’s smiles aren’t forced and where they don’t live in fear of the lord and officials…*

Yona felt like a loose end. There was nothing really that she could help with, especially with Yun having the recovering wounded well in hand. “Want to go with me into Awa?” Jaeha proposed.

She couldn’t contain her grin at his proposal. Flying with Jaeha was something she had been eager to experience in real life, even if in real life it was closer to leaping.

Picking her up in his arms, he leapt off to town.

“You’re not scared of heights?” He asked, a little baffled at her joy. “You were terrified when you went for the senju herb.”

“It’s not like you’ll drop me, if only because there’d be a line waiting to beat you up if you did.” She reminded him. “But why should I be scared? You’ll catch me if I fall. I’ve been looking forward to this since the first dream.”

“Wait, those were real?!” He exclaimed. There was precisely two people who’d know about the dreams.

Himself.

And the girl.

“As real as anything ever is in dreams. Shin-ah remembers them too. Kija can’t, but I need to wait for snow to jog his memory.”

“Why doesn’t he remember?” He asked, curious despite himself.

“Between me wanting to connect to him as a friend, and his own desire for a friend who treated him like everyone else, he can’t make the connection in the real world. While his experience of the dragon’s power has been positive, he was still alone, especially after his predecessor died.” She explained.

Taking in her radiant hair and joyful face, Jaeha once again felt the pull of the dragon’s blood. “I truly hate…this dragon’s blood…” He muttered.

“You may not have a choice about bearing the dragon’s blood, but you still have a choice in how you view it.” She said quietly, with ancient eyes. “I wish I could do some of the things the dragon warriors can, but I’m just a regular person.”

Brushing a lock of hair behind her ear, she continued. “I won’t get to experience what it’s like to lift heavy loads without thought or how the Dragon’s Eyes view the world. This is as close as I can come, to seeing into your world.”

He said nothing. *I can’t tell if she’s trying to get me to accept her as my master, or to accept the dragon’s blood. As much as I hate it, I can’t imagine what it would be like to not have it. If she keeps this up, whatever ‘this’ is, I really will go with her when the crew’s disbanded…*

“As helpful as the knowledge of when he’s likely to move out is, it still doesn’t tell us which ship will have the girls on board.” Gi-Gan commented after Jaeha reported what they had learned in
“If it was possible to send up a flare from the ship they’re on...will it help us save them faster?” Yona asked.

Hak wasn’t not liking the look in her eyes as Gi-Gan asked, “It would. But who would fire it?”

“I would.”

*She really needs to stop being so breathtaking in her resolve.* Hak decided.

“I’ll infiltrate the girls and send up a flare from the ship.” She said calmly. “Defeating Kum-ji will be meaningless if we are too late to save this latest round of girls. We need to recover them quickly so they can’t be used as hostages. To make that happen, I’ll sneak in and signal which ship.”

“I don’t think this is a good idea, Hime-san.” Hak said.

He knew full well that he couldn’t stop her, but he still wanted his disapproval ‘on record’.

“He’s right! You’ll be walking right into Kum-ji’s clutches! It’s far too dangerous!” Kija exclaimed in agreement.

“I’m opposed too.” Yun added, stomping over to her as he listed the problems. “You’ll need to sneak an explosive on board while being held captive! You’ll need to distract the guards and get up on deck! One misstep and you’re dead! It has to be small enough to be sneaked in and yet be powerful enough to get our allies’ attention! It’s incredibly tricky!”

“Shin-ah will be able to spot the flare.” Yona reminded him.

“But we’ll still be up against a bunch of people!”

“We don’t have the time or the manpower to search each ship individually. If they’re able to get the girls to Kai before we reach them then it’ll be too late. In order to prevent that, someone has to join them to keep them safe. And that’s something only I can do.” Yona turned to Gi-Gan, the only one whose opposition she would listen to. “Captain, please…let me fight in this battle too.”

*Sayuri-chan’s little protégé is all grown up.* Gi-Gan reflected. *Despite growing up away from the world’s horrors, she still looks like a soldier in battle at times…I can’t help but be impressed.* “She’s right.” Gi-Gan decreed, to everyone’s surprise. “If she’s successful then we can save the girls.”

“Captain—“ Jaeha began speaking up, not willing to put a girl in danger no matter who she was, but Gi-Gan cut him off.

“BUT, it’s reckless to go in alone. For this to work, someone else has to sneak in with her.” She declared.

“I’ll go!” Hak and Kija immediately volunteered.

“Someone who can pass as a woman.” She reminded them. “This is Kum-ji’s prized goods. If you’re not up to the standards of the others, you’ll get kicked out.”

“I’ll go!” Hak and Kija repeated, with Jaeha joining in.

“Are you even listening, or are you that confident? And now there’s a third idiot volunteering!” She complained.
“If it wasn’t for you being dead and the eyes, you could sneak in Abi.” Shuten said.

“Kaya would be a better choice.” Guen pointed out.

“Abi doesn’t have Zeno ready to beat me up with my dragon leg.” Shuten retorted.

“I’m RIGHT here y’know.” Abi complained, as Gi-Gan sized up the assembly before her. “Out of all of you, there’s only one who could pull it off.”

All eyes turned to Yun. “You’re quick-witted and can handled explosives, right?” Gi-Gan asked.

“W-wait a sec!” Yun stuttered. “I mean, I’m pretty enough to match most girls, but it’s still an evil lord! Plus I’m opposed to Yona going! I’m not sure of success even if I go too!”

Yona looked at him, trying to communicate that he didn’t have to come without voicing it out loud.

Yun just sighed heavily. “…if there’s explosives involved, then I really don’t have a choice?” He asked rhetorically.

“Yun…” Yona said, honestly a little surprised that Yun gave in.

“Talk about troublesome…so much to do for tomorrow.” Yun made a token complaint. “Just relax Yona; I don’t pick lost causes.”

Gi-Gan couldn’t help being amused by the girl when she was approached in the evening. The boy was making the fireworks, and the girl’s young man had spent the afternoon beating up her men.

“Yes?” She asked the girl—young woman—reached her.

“Is there a cabin Hak and I can use tonight?” Gi-gan had to give her props for not blushing. “I know help might come too late…and I want to deny them that, but even more, I want to give it to him.”

“Yun…” Yona said, honestly a little surprised that Yun gave in.

“Joining my crew makes you like a daughter. If he breaks your heart I’ll castrate him.” Gi-Gan told her.

“You’ll have to get in line I’m afraid. I have first dibs.”

Hak pinned Yona to the rock face as she walked past. “Is there anything I can say…that will stop you?” He asked, a dark look in his eyes.
“Hak…” She grabbed his jacket. “I knew Father was lying to me about the state of the kingdom, and I knew some of what was really going on…but it’s worse than I thought. Fire and Awa have been like this for years before his death. Maybe even before Grandfather’s death. It is my responsibility; to the kingdom and myself. I have to fight.”

Reluctantly, Hak backed away. Grabbing his hand, she silently led him back onto the ship and to Gi-Gan’s cabin. His eyes flicked between her and the bed. “As much as I don’t want to think about it…I need to be prepared for failure. I have every faith that you and my dragons will come to mine and Yun’s rescue. But I have to acknowledge you may not reach us in time.” She said, raising her head to meet his eyes.

“This is the only thing left for anyone to take, aside from my life.” The fire flickered in her eyes. “Which is why I’m choosing to give it to you.”

He walked towards her and kept walking until her back hit the wall. He hovered over her. “You’re sure.”

It was a statement of fact, not a question, but she answered it as such. “Yes.”

His hands shook a little as he pulled her into a deep kiss, determined to go slow. She brazenly groped his ass as they kissed. “The moon’s just risen. We’ve have all night.” She whispered, once again a dragon eyeing her treasure.

Once again she felt like a shrine brought out to worship as Hak slowly undressed her, his lingering touches like fire on her skin. It became hard to keep track of everything, pawing at his clothes to try removing them, then getting distracted and discovering bare skin in its place.

Her fire burning inside was merging with the fire his touch left on her skin.

She dug her fingers into his hair as he lavished her breasts, conscious of how any marks he left would have to be where clothes could hide them. All she could do was hold on as he nipped and kissed until she felt close to peaking just from that alone.

He thanked all the gods in the heavens that the bleeding part of her cycle had ended, once he had worked his way to the goal. She was so keyed up that she was shuddering her peak after a few touches. Somehow he managed long deep kisses as she recovered, and before he quite realized it, her hand was with his as they lined him up together. “It’ll hurt.” He reminded her, trembling as he fought to stay still until she said she was ready.

“Do it.” It seemed unimaginable that he didn’t come immediately as her walls began taking him in bit by bit. Pulsing hot, he could feel her heartbeat, rabbit-fast, around him. Encountering something, he pulled back a little before pushing through it hard and quick, her nails nearly drawing blood as she clung to his shoulders and bit her lip through it. Then his hips were flush with hers and he was as deep as he could go. “Yona?” He whispered in her ear. It felt wrong to break this moment by speaking louder…or by calling her ‘Hime-san.’

Her eyes were closed as she panted lightly. Opening half way, fire burned in the entire pupil and iris. “Move.” She said, and maybe later they’d think back and realize that she hadn’t used modern Koukan, but for now, he started pulling out, pushing back in once he was half way out.

Her legs wrapped around his waist as he got used to the action. One of her hands found his and interlaced their fingers. Somehow they managed the coordination to kiss as his thrusts grew faster and deeper. Shifting position so he was more on his knees instead of laying on top of her, his first thrust after the position shift had her half moaning, half screaming into his mouth. He paused,
worried he had hurt her, but somehow she squeezed her walls tighter around him, and growled. “Stop and I’ll rip off your dick and use it myself.” She promised and it was a far, far hotter threat than it should have been.

It took a couple thrusts, but soon he was hitting whatever was causing that reaction consistently. Her walls tightened to nearly painful, but then she peaked and the sensation of feeling her climax around him had him falling over the edge too.

He aimed to flop next to her on his side, but she kept such a grip on him that they both wound up on their sides. Feeling sudden cold (compared to what he had been feeling), Hak realized he had grown soft enough to slip out, and she bit her lip to contain her whimper. “Okay?” He asked, running a hand down her back.

“…it was like being warm in bed then having to get out in the cold, only instead I went from being full to suddenly empty I ache and heavens above how does anything get done?” She babbled. “It seems impossible to imagine willingly turning your attention from it.”

“Sooner or later there’d be chaffing.” He pointed out.

Staring into her eyes, full of dancing fire, he voiced what he had always felt. “I love you.”

She couldn’t help the tears that welled up. “I love you, too.” She replied.

Leaning in, their lips met each other in the middle, and there was…something…that passed between them as they kissed long and deep. It was liquid fire flowing between them, and pulling back, Yona saw a dark flame flickering to life in Hak’s eyes. It brought mind a dream that repeated over the years, of Hak and Ha-kun riding a dark dragon.

She pushed him over onto his back, sprawled on top of him as to have as much skin to skin contact as possible. “Mine.” She half-whispered, half-growled, before biting down on his neck.

Unlike her, Hak didn’t need to try sneaking into a human trafficking trap, so she could mark him as she pleased. However, knowing that Jaeha was likely to tease him to the point of violence, after leaving one mark high by his left ear, she ghosted her lips down to the collarbone.

He was at a loss at what to do with his hands. Her hair was too short for him to feel comfortable pulling it, so he worked a hand between them, caressing her breasts.

Rising up, she glared, before sliding down his body deliberately, stopping once she was eye-level with his cock. Trapping his gaze with her fire, she kept eye contact as her tongue darted out to lick the head.

Lightning-quick, he grabbed her leg, and blinking, she realized that he had moved them so she was lying in the opposite direction as him, bringing her mound level with his mouth. He sent a challenging look up the length of her body, and she responded by taking the head of his cock in her mouth.

Shuddering, he began exploring her folds with his tongue. Lifting a leg up, he revealed her entrance. It was something he would never hint at, the thrill at seeing his seed mixed with her juices and a bit of blood from her maidenhead. Thrusting his tongue in, he moaned into her folds as the action made her moan around the head of his cock.

She didn’t dare try taking him all the way into her mouth. His tongue thrusting in reminded her of
how full she had felt, with his dick inside of her. “Hak-!” She shuddered as he sucked at her nub.

“?’ He pulled back with a questioning noise.

She pushed his hips so they were flat on the bed. Catching the hint, he shifted to his back and helped her position herself over his cock. His nails left crescent indents on her hips as she lowered herself down, stopping when their hips were flush with each other.

Yona arched her back, groaning as he took the action as an invitation to resume his attentions to her breasts. He felt deeper this time, and she couldn’t decide if she wanted to start raising herself up and down on his dick or just grind her hips into his.

He sat up, and their mouths met as she wrapped her arms and legs around his body. Tasting their combined fluids in each other’s mouth was more enticing than either expected, and his hands gripped her hips as he ground against her hard enough that she could picture the bruises forming. She dug her nails in his back, her scream swallowed by him as he managed the coordination to finger her nub.

Something was building and it seemed important that she waited for him to climax. The touches to her nub grew more frantic and less coordinated, and she squeezed around him, sucking on his tongue.

He peaked with a near-shout, and she followed him over, once again the sense of liquid fire flowing between them.

___

*Their serpentine bodies twined together as they flew through the sky, crimson and dark.*

*Crimson plunged into dark.*

*Dark plunged into crimson, and it cycled through the three.*

*The Dragon Gods above smiled, sensing the birth of their brother’s mate.*

*Yellow, tangled with his mate in the dreams of his human half, felt the pulse and gave a quiet sigh. The chances of going back to Heaven soon by dragon standards had gone up.*

*The current Dragon Warriors felt in their souls that their master had claimed a mate. The wolf whined a little, nuzzled by a moon content basking in the sheer ecstasy of their master while the cat cast a disdainful look, more than a little jealous, though he could not say if he was more jealous of his master or his master’s mate.*

___

In the morning Yona dutifully drank two cups of a frankly horrible tasting tea, one meant to discourage pregnancy that Yun served her with a slight frown. She had washed thoroughly, once before (finally) turning in for the night, and again when she woke up. Between the tea, washing, and how her bleeding had just ended, she felt as safe as she could be that she would not become pregnant.

Just in case, Yun had discreetly shown her a packet marked with a symbol she had seen in Mistress Sayuri’s book. She hoped it wouldn’t come to that. “I’m going to get used to this taste, aren’t I?” She commented with a grimace.

“Probably. I’m not sure I really approve, but I understand why you did it.” He admitted. “You’ve been together your whole lives when you think about it.”
“True. Even if it was never acknowledged, and we had thought things would turn out otherwise…” She agreed as Kija entered the room.

Catching sight of her, he turned red and had difficulty meeting her eyes. Shin-ah entered after him along with Jaeha. Shin-ah seemed a little uncomfortable, while Jaeha flat-out smirked. “I suppose the ‘not quite’ lovers is no longer true?” He commented. “Between the torch and the noise…”

Hak casually punched him in the face as he walked past Jaeha to sit down next to Yona. “What does it matter to you?” He asked, picking up Yona to sit her in his lap. “Not like you’re coming with us when this is over.”

“I have to be prepared for the worst. While I know all of you would stop at nothing to save me, I much rather deny them my maidenhead, and give it to the person I chose. The worst they can do now is kill me.” She responded calmly.

Kija really didn’t have a response.

Shuten looked at Abi, flat on his ass paralyzed after having paralyzed him the night before. “Was it worth it?”

If they were still alive, he’d probably be dead, going off the look on Abi’s face.

Chapter End Notes

(fans self) It is definitely not below freezing where I am after writing that last bit...
Yun and Yona were greeted with ‘aww’s and one stupidly brave cat-caller when they emerged dressed to infiltrate Kum-ji’s operation.

Stupidly brave because Hak nearly glared the offender to death. “You’re a shoo-in Yona-chan!” Jaeha assured her with a thumbs up.

“I’ll try my best.” She replied.

In the fire that was last night she hadn’t considered how much mat—making love—with Hak would affect her dragons. Zeno felt of lazy contentment tinged with worry for her, but he had Kaya. Kija was flustered and a little mournful, Shin-ah was blissfully content and a touch embarrassed, since feeling it was more intimate than watching it, and Jaeha was confused…and maybe a little jealous.

If she wanted to be truthful, she didn’t think she would *mind* being sexually intimate with her dragons, bar Zeno. Zeno was still happily mated—married, damnit—and there was the lingering guilt of words unsaid. But Hak would mind, and the very reason he wouldn’t try stopping her if it was what she really wanted was enough.

Even now, mated to Hak-Ha-kun-Dark Dragon, it was a thought that didn’t distress her. She’d consent to kisses and touching, but no intercourse. The thought did not compute.

Dragon-her really should have paid more to the information about dragon mates before becoming him-her.

Closing her eyes, she could still see the crimson dragon and the dark dragon twining around each other as they flew the mating flight in her dreams last night.

“Go become Kum-ji’s mistress kid!” One of the pirates urged Yun.

“I’ve got his primary beat when it comes to beauty; I wouldn’t settle for less!” He boasted.

“Where is the flare Yun?” She asked.

“My sash.” He patted his sash as he continued. “It’s attached to a wire. It’s small but should shoot up high. Only trouble is I couldn’t make more than one without potentially decreasing the height.”

She thought of making a comment out loud about not getting it wet, but tempting fate was not anything she was eager to do.

“I guess we should head out now.” She said, turning to find Kija in a dress, apples shoved in the front to imitate breasts. “Is there anything with longer sleeves?” He complained, holding up his dragon arm.

Shin-ah stood nearby holding Ao in his hands, looking impossibly adorable in a little dress of her
own with a bow on her ear, torn between confusion and bemusement.

"You're not coming Kija." Yona said firmly.

"If only my hand was smaller…” He said mournfully.

“That’s not the problem.” She said bluntly. “You’re beautiful, but not the right kind of beautiful to pass as a girl.”

She walked over to Yun, who was assuring Hak that he’d keep her safe. “We can’t put this off any longer, so we better go.” She told him.

Hak stood before her, blocking her way as he pulled her into a deep, passionate kiss that had everyone (living and dead) averting their eyes. The dark fire from last night smoldered in his eyes as he reluctantly ended it. She pressed the dagger that was the last gift of her parents into his hand. “Keep it safe?” She murmured. “I borrowed a plain one.”

Vaguely surprised at the action yet understanding that sneaking in with a dragon-marked item was a sure way to be caught, he tucked it away in his robe.

He stared after her long after even her brilliant crimson hair was beyond his sight.

“Ne, Yo-Lina?” Yun whispered on their walk there. “Is Hak the reincarnation of someone close to Hiryuu-ou?”

Yona blinked. “Oh, I thought we had told you already. Hak is the reincarnation of Ha-kun, Hiryuu’s wife and Queen.”

He felt his brain freeze. “Raiju had been a girl?!” He stuttered.

“Ha-kun’s reincarnated a few times between her death and being born as Hak, but those lives didn’t leave much of an impression behind. Mostly she had wanted to check up on Wind and fight for it if needed, since those are her lands.” She elaborated. “And she did get bored. Him-me had vowed to reincarnate as his parents’ child, so being oath-bound he couldn’t go with her.”

“…I can’t help being even more impressed with Raiju. Anyone gaining a dragon’s loyalty in the myths is special.” He admitted. “He’s crazy strong, but no wonder the two of you leapt from first kiss to…last night so fast. Does he know?”

“Yes. While I never told him directly, I did promise to confirm if he was right. We’re different people from who we had been in that distant past life, so I had tried not to cling only to him, but with what happened with Su-won, and nearly losing him…” Fire flared in her eyes. “He’s mine and I’m his and I’ve stopped caring about how unfair it is to see him like that, since he sees me the same way.”

Yun couldn’t suppress his shiver at the look on her face. “No wonder the stories say that when a mortal earns a dragon’s love, that love is for eternity.” He commented. “Through all their lives and beyond.”

She hummed in agreement, and he debated bringing up the ghosts he had been seeing and hearing.

Except he hadn’t noticed them lately.

_Maybe I did imagine them. But why would I come up with images for the first Dragon Warriors? Never mind that I didn’t make up an image for Ouryuu; probably because I haven’t met his_
Undenounced to Yun, Guen, Abi, and Shuten had noticed that he was noticing them, and by mutual agreement decided to keep invisible. “Y’know, I wonder if the kid becoming able to see us is related to Yona.” Shuten wondered. “Cuz I’m reminded of how Zeno was able to see us again after visiting her.”

“Maybe...” Guen agreed.

“…you’re still going to become visible to him randomly to mess with him, aren’t you?” Abi asked flatly.

“Don’t act all high and mighty when you’ll be doing the same thing.” Shuten retorted.

Yona struggled to keep her fire contained during the confrontation with Kum-ji. She had landed poorly when the trap door opened, and her ankle twinged in protest. She just hoped that the blow Yun took to his stomach didn’t damage the flare. The words she spoke to deflect Kum-ji, lying about her identity and proposing to pose as ‘Yona-hime’ if it served his business, left a bitter taste in her mouth. He was the sort that Mistress Sayuri would never tolerate in her house, but had had to deal with in her younger days, before becoming the highest ranked courtesan in the capital and gained the influence to ‘discourage’ such men from visiting her house and those subservient to hers.

“Men like those, who see women as weak and only useful when we are on their knees servicing them, are at once the easiest and the hardest to manipulate. Easy, because they never look deeper as long as you show them what they want. Hard, because if you make a misstep you will come to harm and have greater difficulty in reasserting the image you want them to see.” Mistress Sayuri had told her when she was twelve.

“...is it that foolish, wanting to change Awa? It hasn’t been like this forever.” She asked the somewhat older girl, who had been trapped for two weeks. “If there was someone stupid enough to help, will you turn them away? There are plenty of ‘stupid’ people fighting for you, for all of us. All I ask, is that you don’t turn them away…when they come to help.”

This was going to be a long day, made even longer by wanting to get everything over and done with.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” Jaeha asked Hak. “You’ve been there since yesterday.”

“I slept like this. You should worry about White Snake.” He jerked a thumb in Kija’s direction, where he had once again woken up fighting air. “He keeps dozing off, only to wake up punching air and screaming about Kum-ji.”

“Eh, he needs to learn how to relax enough to get sleep before battle or he’ll ruin his pretty face. A couple girls and some liquor and I’m good.” Jaeha half-boasted.

“...Ryokuryuu...has bags under his eyes...” Shin-ah said as he came up behind Jaeha, making him nearly jump over the mast. “Would it kill you to make noise?!” He complained, grabbing his chest. “I was with a couple girls—“

“...spent the whole day in the crow’s nest...” Shin-ah outed him.

Jaeha looked away with a flush. “I SO don’t have bags under my bags.” He muttered.

Hak and Kija, fed up with his denials, united and jumped Jaeha, trying to push his bangs away
enough to see his eyes. “…oh defilement…but it was still good…” He crooned, baring a shoulder.

“Oi, keep your clothes on.” Hak ordered, thoroughly through with everything and eager for the fighting to start.

He had felt on fire since he came inside Yona for the first time. That night, he dreamed of a cat, thrumming with thunder and lightning, turning into a dark-colored dragon, which then took off into the heavens with a crimson dragon.

“He DOES have bags under his eyes.” Kija affirmed. “Does this mean you’re as worried about Hime-sama as the rest of us?”

Jaeha snorted. “I worry about all girls, so don’t act like it’s something special.” He retorted.

“But if you feel anything like I do, then I can trust you to have my back in battle.” Kija said warmly.

“Believe what you want.” Jaeha replied, looking away. Just what are they up to? Why can I picture traveling and fighting with all of them so easily? Is it the dragons’ blood resonating? Yona is the crux. The more she consents to my wish to not serve her, the more I want to. “Anyway, aren’t you worried about the other kid, Yun?”


“He’s more mature than the rest of us put together, and wicked smart.” Hak explained.

“I find myself looking up to him at times.” Kija admitted.

 “…they’re moving…” Shin-ah said, staring off at the harbor.

“Huh?” Yun wondered as they passed yet another man already unconscious. The blood on his head meant he wasn’t passed out drunk. “The others couldn’t have found the ship yet…”

Zeno… Yona caught a glimpse of Kaya. “He couldn’t stay that far away anymore, not with the others gathered. Along with his own investment in seeing Kum-ji gone…he’s easing your way, but it’s still up to you to get past the last couple men and onto the deck. He’s gone to sink the drug-running ships.”

She could tell Zeno was close, now that she paid attention, and something eased inside. Even knowing that to sink the ships he’d likely injure himself enough to generate scales on his arms, to gain enough strength to shatter wood…

It was close, the day she’d have all of them at her side.

“Let’s not question our luck, and keep going.” She told him.

Hak was finding it harder than he expected, holding back from killing the mercenaries. Somehow, his weapon felt lighter than normal.

Kija, having fought besides Hak before, presumed that this was a sign he was fully recovered from the injuries he had been suffering from when they met. I never imagined that a regular human could fight with strength equal to the dragons…

Jaeha couldn’t help being impressed with Hak, while Shin-ah was slightly baffled. The dark fire inside Hak had flared into a brilliant flame out of embers the night before last.
With a mental shrug, he ignored the dark flame as the flare caught his attention. “Flare.”

“Where?!” Hak demanded.

Shin-ah pointed to a spot on the other side of the flotilla. “Damnit, too far! Jaeha!” He ordered, and Jaeha grabbed Shin-ah and began leaping to the ship the flare had come from.

Yona’s ankle was firmly against all the activity, even as adrenaline dulled the pain. She and Yun breathed a sigh of relief as the flare shot up into the sky.

That relief was short-lived as the mercenaries tossed her onto the deck. “There was no bomb! It was all a ploy to signal the pirates!” One of them exclaimed, twisting her hair in his fingers as he pulled her head up, exposing her throat.

She was in no position to grab the dagger hidden in her sash, let alone do more than annoy the man holding her with it. Dimly aware of Yun begging, she was distracted by the wild cat carrying the moon, drawing closer…closer…

A gust of wind sent the mercenaries flying, Jaeha kicking the one holding her hair off of her. “Jaeha!” She exclaimed, ignoring the urge to rub her scalp where she was sure several strands had been pulled out.

“You actually pulled it off…you really are something…” Jaeha admitted, brandishing his knives like dragon claws as the mercenaries recovered and drew closer. “If you want to live, stay back.” The cat was prepared to pounce. “I can’t say what I’ll do if you hurt her…”

Grabbing Yun, whom Ao had freed from his bindings, Yona drug both of them out of the way as Shin-ah joined Jaeha in attacking the mercenaries, who had reinforcements boarding from the ship next to them.

“I’m surprised Raiju and Kija aren’t here.” Yun commented quietly.

“They’re probably on the other side of the flotilla. Jaeha can only carry one person, and Shin-ah is the only one who could see where the flare was fired from…” She replied quietly. “But where’s Kum-ji?”

“He has to be close to his ‘merchandise’.” He agreed. “If not on this ship then…Jaeha! Shin-ah!” He yelled, pointing. “Kum-ji’s on that ship!”

With a nod, Jaeha darted below deck.

That settled, Yun turned his attention to the girls just coming up from below, carrying ropes. The mercenaries were battered enough to not complain about being tied up.

After helping bind two men, something told Yona to look over to the neighboring ship, the one Kum-ji was on. There was a small boat rowing away, with a familiar figure on board.

He was getting away.

So caught up in the fire of her rage, of her target escaping, it took a minute to register Yun was speaking to her, as he too noticed the small boat. “What--?”

“Give me the bow Yun.” She commanded quietly, and he scrambled to obey her.

Accepting the bow without a word, she walked to the bow.
She’d let Jaeha take the kill; he had more right to it, having fought for Awa for so long.

She was surprised nothing burst into flames when Kum-ji’s arrow clipped Jaeha’s shoulder, making him fall from the sky. Notching an arrow, she waited.

She wanted him to know who was killing him.

It didn’t matter they were both on boats, or that it was the pre-dawn hours. She was the fire, and it merged with the arrow, making it fly true to pierce Kum-ji’s heart. He fell backwards, into the sea.

Law Code of Hiryuu-ou

Section III-Crimes Against Subjects

Verse IX

May he who sells Our people to foreign lands be cast into the sea, forsaken by the homeland he deprived them of.

The first thing Hak did once they were both back on shore was sweep Yona up into a deep kiss. Truthfully, he mostly wanted to find a quiet corner where he could fuss over her for being so reckless, then reward her for a successful plan. Wonder if she’d let me…? He mused as the kiss ended on account of oxygen demands.

It was then that he and Kija got a good look at both her and Yun…who were looking very battered.

Once again the pair of them acted as a unit, terrorizing the mercenaries. “Oi, settle down you rare beasts.” Yun complained, before getting distracted by all the injured people who wanted to get drunk instead of be treated. “HEY, DYING PEOPLE!!!! STOP!!!”

He was utterly ignored, save for one person trying to convince him it was pirate tradition, getting drunk after a successful fight. Muttering at everyone and their misplaced priorities, he finally ambushed Jaeha, who had carelessly revealed his profusely bleeding wound when he indulged in his stripper tendencies.

Grabbing his head, Yona gave Hak a sultry look, pulling him behind her when he replied with his own perverted smile.

The ‘quiet corner’ wound up being a dock warehouse, filled with stacks of sail canvas. Setting her down on one stack that was up to his waist, he gently lifted her injured ankle up. “I landed wrong when the trapdoor opened.” She explained, wincing as he touched the darkening bruise.

“You’ll have to let Yun look at it later. But for now…” Pressing a kiss to the bruise, he gently set the leg down and leaned into a kiss.

Liquid fire flowed back and forth between them. Ending the kiss, they leaned their foreheads against each other, taking in the fire dancing in each other’s eyes. “Dragon-me really should have learned more about dragon mates before descending.” She whispered. “I’m pretty sure that’s what you are now. I dreamed of a crimson dragon flying with a dark dragon.”

“So did I. I’ve felt on fire, since I first came inside of you.” He admitted. “My weapon feels lighter.”

“I think Ouryuu will be joining us soon. Then I can try asking his wife if she’s noticed anything, but
I’m not sure how much will apply to you, since she’s dead…”

“Shall I presume he’s why several ships seemed to spontaneously sink?” He asked with a raised eyebrow. I’m getting really curious about the mysterious ‘Ouryuu’. All I remember from Ha-kun is a yellow brat. “But enough about other people.”

His hand inched its way up her leg and under her skirt. She pulled his sash off, and slid her hands inside his robes, pulling him closer. He began kissing her neck as his other hand worked her own sash off. She could only hold on as he started on the spot that sent her blood boiling, sliding her hands inside his pants, gripping his ass.

Pulling back, Hak slid her dress down her shoulders, leaving her in the thigh-high under robe. As he did that, Yona pulled off his own robes. Ignoring the clangs as the daggers hidden on their persons fell away and hit the floor, she laid down on the canvas, pulling loose the bow holding the under robe shut.

“One day I’ll understand why a scantily clad woman is more appealing than a full up naked one.” He remarked, his cock twitching at the sight of her, the under robe barely covering her nipples and mound. “But I think I’m beginning to see it…”

“Shut up and touch me.”

“As you command, Hime-sama.” He ran his tongue up her folds, stopping to suck on her nib.

Clenching her legs around him, she sunk her fingers into his hair, holding him in place as he continued lavishing attention on her nub and folds. “Ha—too-“

He eased back, giving her a chance to recover from the intense stimulation. “Can I…?” He asked, sending a glance up her body.

Panting, she nodded her consent, letting go of him. Her pulsing heat consumed him as he sunk slowly in. “I know we can’t chance it, but I think I’m gonna miss this.” He admitted.

“We can still do things, but *this* we can likely only chance once my bleeding ends. Yun’s prepared, but I’d rather not. I…it’s not truly alive until its Spark could survive outside, but…” She trailed off. “But the only way to fully avoid it is not doing this.”

“Then I’ll just have to take as much time as I can.” Nuzzling his face against hers, he started thrusting, slow and deep.

She just clung to him, stroking any bit of skin she could reach. It seemed more intense, with this kind of thrusting. The moment stretched on forever, his new dark fire mixing with her own.

An eternity later, he sped up, switching to shallow and fast, more of a grinding action, as she squeezed around him. Suddenly there was a finger on her nub, and she muffled her shout into his shoulder as she tipped over the edge, taking him with her.

Yona was almost floating as she panted, Hak’s weight a solid warmth on top of her. She jumped when he pulled away. Reluctantly, she sat up, tying her under robe back together as he dug around, turning up a pile of cloth scraps that were not canvas. “Not sure what these are doing in here, but…” He brought the largest ones over, and helped her wipe up his seed.

“This might have held different cloth before the sails, or they were put in the wrong spot.” She proposed, pulling her dress back on as he grabbed his own robes.
“Hopefully we haven’t been missed too much.” He commented as he handed her both daggers to tuck away. “Even if the monkeys gen 2 felt what was up.”

Now presentable to other people, she found herself swept up in Hak’s arms. “But before we party, Yun’s looking at your ankle.” He decreed.
All of Awa was swept up in the excitement of Kum-ji’s demise. Without any planning, stalls popped up, with food of all kinds, like at a festival.

Yun wrapped her ankle up tight, to where she couldn’t bend it, and gave her stern orders to rest often.

Yona barely had a chance to nod in acknowledgement of his orders before she was swept up with Yuri and the other rescued girls.

It was nice, having a chance to spend time with other girls, in a way she could never recall experiencing before. “So is he your lover?” Yuri asked with a sly look, gesturing to Hak, who was drinking with one of the pirates.

Yona just blushed, and Yuri and the other girls giggled. “How is he?” One of them asked.

“It’s impossible to express it in words.” She answered, blushing harder, which set off another round of giggles.

“C’mon, the stalls are giving away free food! Even things that normally cost a lot!” Another girl exclaimed, and Yona was carried off into the crowd.

That evening Jaeha sat alone overlooking the cove, playing his erhu. Light footsteps drew close, and Yona sat down, leaning back to back with him, listening to his music much as they had in the dreams. “Care to try?” He asked, wondering why she was with him instead of Hak.

She grimaced. “No thanks. I don’t want to break it.”

“Sounds like you make a better pirate than a woman.”

“I can play the koto!” She exclaimed. “I’ve ranked as a dance master since I was thirteen and Yun’s been teaching me to sew and cook!”

“Alright, alright.” Jaeha demurred.

“If you’re going to be like that, I’ll leave.” She stood, only to be stopped by Jaeha’s hand grabbing hers.

She turned to look at him. “I’m not the kind of girl to settle for one night, I’m already spoken for, and you probably want Hak more than me.”

“Maybe I just want an audience for my music.” He countered, avoiding the statement of him wanting Hak more than her.

“I’ve already told you that you have to share me with others.” She pulled, and he let her hand slid out of his.

She didn’t leave, but returned to her previous position.
The cat was purring as he started playing again.

Gi-Gan quietly shut her door behind her, surveying her seemingly empty room. Sitting down at her small table, she pulled out another cup. Filling both, she told the room, “Next time you’re coming with me, and finally making an honest woman out of me.” She tossed back the liquor in her cup like the hard-drinking pirate she was currently.

Not the dainty sips required of a courtesan.

Opening her eyes, she saw the other cup was empty. With a soft smile, she refilled both, and split the bottle with her unseen guest. She could feel phantom fingers in her hair as she undid her bun, and a heated gaze as she changed, despite her gnarled body.

Sliding underneath the covers, she could almost feel the fire that passed between the girl and her young man a few nights ago. Closing her eyes, she drifted to sleep almost immediately, to the world where she didn’t have to rely on hazy and distant past memories to picture her guest.

Shuten laid down next to Gi-Gan, wearing a soft look that practically no one would ever believe his face could make. “I promise.” He whispered, and was rewarded with a smile that crossed her face in her sleep.

Resting a hand on top of hers, he drifted to sleep as well.

Yona was the first one to stir that morning, sprawled on top of Hak. Stretching, she decided to go for a walk.

She wandered aimlessly through the streets of Awa, quietly relishing this chance to be alone. Even her spirits were elsewhere, although she could feel Zeno trailing at a distance on the roofs. The very fact he was so close told her that he’d been joining them soon.

_It’s hard to believe that the day before we were returning from battle. I hope Awa will be able to find its real smiles again soon._

Looking up at the sky, her thoughts turned to her father. _I know I’m defying what you wanted for me, in my fight to survive...but have I gotten a little stronger? Bit by bit, I will gain the strength to return to where your blood was spilled..._

There was a pulse of concern from the sun, and she realized she had wandered farther than she had intended. “I need to head back, before everyone starts to worry.” She said, turning and starting to run back to the ship.

“Oof!” She ran into someone, the sudden stop knocking her to the ground. “I’m so sorry!” She exclaimed, panting slightly.

The person she had run into knelt down. “No, it’s fine. I wasn’t watching where I was going either.”

Yona felt everything freeze. _That voice..._ Rising her head, her eyes widened as she met the eyes of the other person.

It was Su-won she had run in to.

And he looked as surprised as she felt.
Su-won had nearly convinced himself that the early morning light was coloring the girl’s hair red when she looked up, and familiar violet eyes widened.

“Are... are you a ghost?” He found himself asking. “I heard—the cliffs on the border of Fire and Wind—I heard you died.”

It was then that he noticed her hands shaking. “…it really is you, isn’t it?” He whispered, just barely containing the tremble of his voice.

Yona was alive.

“Where’s Hak?” He asked. As soon as the question left his mouth he realized how foolish it was to ask. “Stupid question. If you’re here... then he must be too.”

Somehow, with him-her supporting her inside, she found her voice. “Why are you here?”

“I came to look into rumors regarding Awa’s lord, Yan Kum-ji.” He answered as he stood.

“He won’t be peddling in drugs and women anymore.” She told him, fire burning in her eyes as she remembered Kum-ji’s foulness. “Section III, Verse IX of the law code.”

Su-won’s eyes widened with that statement. “How—“

“Su-won-sama!” Ju-do called, over the sounds of running footsteps.

Yona cursed internally as she frantically looked from side to side. There was no alcove for her to hide in. As she was debating the option of running, Su-won grabbed her, bundling her up in his cloak before her mind caught up to his action. “Be still,” he hissed, hardly audible over her racing heart.

What she would have given in be in his arms like this Before! Even now, mated with Hak-Ha-kun-Dark Dragon, she felt her face flush, as much from the close contact as from anger and panic.

There was something poking her chest, inside his robes, that felt book-shaped. Dimly aware of Su-won’s discussion with Ju-do (really, what was so hard about claiming she was an informant?), she shifted enough for the robes to part, revealing two books.

Her face paled as she recognized the cover of the one. He found the book I was writing him-me’s memories in! Even though I used the ancient characters, it’s not like it’s impossible to translate it into the modern ones, and he’s certainly smart enough to do it. As quickly as her panic over the books rose, it dropped. Maybe this is better; he can’t deny his own work, no matter how much disbelief he inherited from Uncle about the birth myth.

The cloak was swept back, Su-won getting Ju-do to leave him alone to ‘say his goodbyes’. Meeting his eyes, she briefly clenched the books, before letting go. “You snooped in my room.” She stated.

Su-won looked away with a faint blush. “I went to distract myself with one of your poetry books only to find decidedly not-poetry inside the cover. I got curious.”

Yona couldn’t contain the brief quirk of her lips at his embarrassment over being called on it. “Well, if you also read my notes and reports, then I’ll leave the question of Earth’s economy to you, as I’ve taken care of Kum-ji. As long as the pirates are pardoned, I’ll forgive you for that.”

Looking away, her eyes landed on his sword. Noticing what had her attention, he quietly asked, “Do you want to kill me?”
Her eyes widened and flew back up to his face, but he was watching the birds leaving their nests in the roof eaves for the day. “Of course you do. But there is still something I have to do before then.”

Reaching out, his hand stopped short of touching her now much shorter hair. “Good-bye, Yona.” He said, turning to walk away.

“Su-won.”

He turned back to look at her. The ancient look in her eyes seemed to cut to his core. “I don’t know if I want to kill you. However…was revenge…really worth more…than anything Hak or I thought the three of us had? Was it worth more…than that dream of staying in bed with a cold forever?”

In lieu of answering, he pulled the hood of his cloak up and walked away.

He didn’t know the answer to that any more than she did.

Hearing her cries as what had happened finally processed, he stored the sound away in his heart, with the look in her eyes when she dared him to kill her, and the image of her face as she realized that the sight of her father’s body on the floor and the blood on his sword was no nightmare.

“Seeing her fire blaze bright…maybe atonement can be had if that is my funeral pyre…” He whispered.

He would never seek atonement for avenging his father.

But for hurting her?

He’d prepare the offering pyre himself.

Yona could still feel her face burning as she changed. What was I thinking, taking my dress off in front of everyone! Okay, I wasn’t really thinking, trying to get my mind off meeting Su-won again, but shouldn’t it have processed as a Bad Idea? Dressed in her usual clothes, she folded up her dirtied dress and under robe (hoping Yun wouldn’t give her any looks over the stains on the under robe) and started tucking back into her sash what she usually kept there.

The hair pin was last. She ran a finger over the enamel and jade of the flowers and butterfly. Biting her lip, she finally tucked it away as well.

Dropping her laundry with her pack, she went to the bluff overlooking where she had gone after the senju herb. “So much has happened…since I fled the castle.”

“Too true.” Hak said next to her. “You’re not surprised I’m here.” He commented, looking at her with the dark fire smoldering in his eyes.

“You’re everywhere Hak.”

“Not this morning. I slept later than I should have.”

“Even if you’re staying right by my side for the rest of our lives”—and the next ones—“I was relishing the chance to be alone for a change.” She admitted.

“What was he doing here?” He asked, changing the subject.

“To see for himself if the rumors about Awa were true. I suppose he’ll be returning through Chi’shin, to gain the general’s loyalty.” She replied.
“And you? Where do you plan to go?”

“Depends on where Kija and Shin-ah feel Ouryuu. After that, I need to meet with Mundok again. I need to ask him if he knew what Father’s long term goals had been, and why he was so against Su-won as my husband and his heir, despite what everyone believed.” She answered. “Will you come with me, when I leave Awa tomorrow?” She asked, grabbing his hand.

“Of course.”

“You guys coming too?” She asked, turning to see Kija, Shin-ah, and Yun ineffectively hiding behind a large rock.

“You can’t just tell one of us that we’re leaving without everyone else!” Yun declared.

“He’s right Hime-sama! Us Four Dragon Warriors will follow you to the ends of the earth if that is your desire!” Kija exclaimed, grabbing Shin-ah.

“Why don’t you just go home?” Hak pondered. “Besides, stop saying the ‘Four Dragon Warriors’ when there’s only two of you!”

“Everyone.” Yona said, distracting Hak and Kija from their budding fight. “I’m leaving Awa tomorrow. Will you come with me?”

“Of course!/What a pain.” Kija and Yun said at the same time.

“Yun!”

Yona eyed the crowd seeing them off for Jaeha, but she couldn’t spot him. He felt close, but there was no hint of his green hair. “Captain Gi-Gan, have you seen Jaeha?”

“That snot-nosed urchin? Who cares?” Gi-Gan deadpanned. Seeing Yona’s downcast look, she reassured her. “I guess you’ll have to come back and visit.”

“I guess…” Yona conceded.

“I would have thought he’d put up a pretense of seeing us off...”

“If you ever need a ship, I’ll arrange one for you.” Gi-Gan told her.

“Thank you.” Yona said with a smile.

“...your face is still swollen.” Gi-Gan felt like she had to point.

“I’m fine.” Yona assured her, making Gi-Gan laugh. “You look like a stiff breeze could carry you away, you skinny little thing. But you have toughened up quite nicely.”

“Huh? I wasn’t that weak!” Yona protested futilely.

Gi-Gan snorted. “Please! You were helpless and delicate! Not that you can cook or clean properly. If you don’t learn, you’ll never get a husband if recklessness is all you’ve got.”

“Why’d it’d be your business?!?” Yona yelled, her face flushing.

“Hime-san, it’s fine. You just need a husband who’ll wash the clothes while you chop wood.” Hak commented.

Sensing a chance, Yona took it. Latching onto Yun’s arm, she said, “Yun-kun! We’ve got Hak’s
blessing to run off and elope!"

Hak lost his grip on his weapon while Kija sputtered protests and Yun turned red. "Really Hak, you left yourself open to that one, practically suggesting I marry Yun." She told him with a half-hearted glare.

"Well if things don’t work out with him, come find me. Grilling a fish isn’t hard, so you needn’t learn anything fancier." One of the pirates suggested with a grin.

"No way! If you’re gonna be rude like that then it’s time to go!" Yona started stomping off, only to be stopped by Gi-Gan. "Take this."

'This’ turned out to be a pouch full of senju herb. "Take care of yourself, alright?" Gi-Gan said gently as she patted Yona’s head.

“Captain’s being all mothery, isn’t she?” The pirates whispered among themselves.

“…thank you, for everything.” Yona thanked Gi-Gan with a bow, bangs hiding the budding tears.

Turning, she only made it a few steps before she whirled back around, crying. Running back, she grabbed Gi-Gan in a hug. Startled, Gi-Gan smiled down at the familiar crimson hair as she returned the hug, the crowd around her sniffling as well.

Now alone at the gate, Gi-Gan said, “You better beat it brat. Your timing’s already off.”

With a sheepish pout, Jaeha leapt after Yona and the others.

Drawing deep from her pipe, Gi-Gan slowly let out the smoke, watching it whirl up into the sky. "Time to start cleaning up. But first the list the princess wants made up for the royal officials sure to come."

Tucking her pipe away, Gi-Gan headed to the late and unlamented Kum-ji’s estate. “If it’s one thing he learned well from his father, it was how to keep proper records…”

“Yona, stop crying.” Yun said, in fact crying more than Yona was, most of her tears dry.

“You’re crying too Yun.” Kija reminded him, flat out sobbing.

“You’ve got them both beat, White Snake.” Hak pointed out, a little twitchy with the sense of eyes on him.

“I’m surprised Jaeha wasn’t there to say good-bye.” Yun commented, rubbing his eyes.

“Huh? He’s right here, isn’t he?” Kija asked, confused.

“Shin-ah.” At Yona’s quiet command, Shin-ah cut down a seemingly random tree.

It turned out to not be so random when, with a high-pitched scream that he will deny until the end of time, Jaeha hit the ground. “HUH?!?” Yun questioned, baffled.

“My silly dragon,” Yona gently scolded with a smile. “The bond goes both ways this generation. I knew you were there the whole time. Were you planning to wait for us to get into trouble and just ‘happen’ to jump into the rescue?” She asked, holding out her hand to help Jaeha up.
The wild cat shook off the fall with the demeanor of it being the plan all along. “All my other obligations have wrapped up, but then you were crying and it just wasn’t the right time to say hi.” Jaeha defended with a faint blush.

“Oh? Have you changed your mind about me being too young? Or have you decided your old bones can, in fact, keep up?” Yona asked with a smirk, the embers in her irises dancing.

Jaeha somehow stumbled amidst dusting his clothes off at the words, staring at her as his brain went offline and the new dark flame that was Hak flared with mirth and glee. “Oi,” Hak wacked Jaeha in the head with his wrapped blade, jolting him out of being called ‘old’ again. “Don’t get ahead of yourself here.”

“Yeah, you’re not traveling alone with Yona, so introduce yourself properly to the rest of us.” Yun ordered. Please let the last dragon be normal! Okay, no dragon can be ‘normal’, so please let him be sensible!

“I’ll start over.” Jaeha half-grumbled, already aware of how Yun practically ran everything. “My name is Jaeha, and I bear the monstrous leg of Ryokuryuu in my right leg. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry Yun, but Zeno's the weirdest of the lot. I was going to skip the good-bye, but I couldn't let the suggestion of Yona and Yun running off together go.

Okay, Gi-Gan’s backstory that didn’t make it into the story proper. Born to pirates, she had been kidnapped and sold by a rival crew as a child. She had been Mistress Sayuri’s mentor in Kuuto when she was younger. Contracted to serve as an exclusive companion and host by an official whose wife was too ill to travel, he did the honorable thing and bought her out of the contract when she became pregnant, taking her home with him. That child was Kum-ji. Kum-ji wasn’t aware of whom his real mother was, as Gi-Gan ceded him to the official’s wife once he was weaned, as being the son of courtesan would negatively impact his future career. Being good with both ships and money, she started up a merchant shipping crew. Fast forward and Kum-ji has a teenage daughter (Gi-Gan’s granddaughter) who falls for one of Gi-Gan’s men. Kum-ji, completely opposed to the match and already deeply involved in the drug trade, has the man killed and enters the human trafficking business by selling his daughter for staining the family honor and to recoup the money he had spent securing a proper marriage for her. Su-won would be a fool to ignore the influence Gi-Gan has as the leader of the pirates/fishermen who saved Awa.
“Talk about a bizarre group.” Jaeha commented to himself as he left the camp to take care of business that evening. “And I thought the pirates had been bizarre.”

While after meeting Yona he figured they had a good reason to be camping outside of town together, he had uncomfortable to realize it was as much for Yona and Yun’s safety as to conserve limited funds. The tent rotation was cute yet unsurprising, but the arguing over who sleeps with who…

Yona and Hak were the given, with only Yun and maybe Shin-ah acceptable alternatives to Hak. Hak and Kija could not be paired together, and Jaeha really wanted to avoid constant talk of the dragon brotherhood for as long as possible, since Yun mentioned making another, larger, tent.

Shin-ah surprisingly spoke up and said he wasn’t comfortable sleeping with Jaeha. Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned how curious I was to see if Seiryuu’s eyes were as beautiful as the tales say…

Done with his evening business, he started back. Out of earshot of the camp, he stopped.

“So are you going to make an appearance?” Jaeha said to the air and the presence that had been trailing him nearly constantly since the others had arrived in Awa.

“Well given how the kid and the Hakuryuu wimp can’t see me, it’s just easier to stay hidden.” A green-haired man, dressed in a cloak and carrying a spear, said as he became visible.

“So you’re the one whom I have to thank?” Jaeha asked, a dark look in his eyes.

“One, by the time any of us realized our powers would be inherited by descendants, Hiryuu-ou had been several decades dead, and it was long past the chance to change our minds. Two—“ Ripping off one of his bracers, he showed his wrist to Jaeha. “—I have my own bones to pick with the village.”

His wrist had the same scars Jaeha’s had. Scars from shackles.

Jaeha couldn’t stop his eyes from widening. “I had been in the fighting pits, in what would become Wind. I managed to kill the overseers and break myself and the rest out. We all became mercenaries, and somehow I wound up running the whole damn group.” Shuten explained, putting his bracer back on.

“If you had already escaped bondage, why bind yourself to another master?” Jaeha just couldn’t comprehend how his ancestor could agree to that. Unless…

“We all had the choice to refuse, so we weren’t forced to drink at sword point.” His ancestor said, reading his face. “As to why…I first met Hiryuu-ou when he was looking for aid in securing Kouka’s borders. He didn’t have the manpower at the time, and the regions to the south were less of a threat, so he felt reasonably secure contracting with mercenaries for its defense. What had me agreeing to the contract was how he offered food, shelters, and medicine for everyone. We had broken out the brothel girls when we broke out, and there were various runaways that joined us. It was part of his initial proposal, not something I had to insist on. So when Ryokuryuu-kami came…at the very least, I could be sure of decent treatment. And I always wanted to touch the clouds.” Shuten
looked up at the sky, and the clouds floating over the stars. “Though, truth be told, it was more binding that I had thought it would be. Didn’t stop me from thinking he was an idiot and calling him on it.”

“…you called the founder of Kouka and a former dragon god an idiot to his face?” Jaeha’s mind boggled at the image. *Then again, if he was anything like Yona-chan, he probably was an idiot.*

“He agreed with me! But nothing tops how I got drafted as an expert when the idiot went to Hakuryuu in a panic, saying he and his queen had head-butted since he thought she wanted to check his temperature or something when she had been trying to kiss him. He was banned from her presence until he came back and explained what she had actually been trying to do.” Shuten deadpanned.

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. Actually happened. How he learned about sex without learning about kissing is beyond me.” Shuten sent Jaeha a look out of the corner of his eye. “Anything else? You can’t beat me up for drinking the dragon’s blood.”

Jaeha didn’t answer, just walking away into the camp.

“Hak, I told you, I’m not running off with Yun, so you don’t need to show that you can do laundry.” Yona told him as he scrubbed his coat.

“That’s not why I’m washing it. Yun took one look at the stains and said hell no. Funny how he didn’t complain about washing your clothes from Awa when they had the same stains.” He informed her, making her blush as she remembered what had passed between them in Awa.

Yun returned from his supply run, holding a pinkish scale-like object. “What’s that?” Kija asked, hanging clothes on the line.

“The merchant called it ‘the scale of Hakuryuu.'” Yun said, holding it up with a frown.

“You hawking your scales White Snake and not sharing the profits?” Hak asked Kija, half seriously informing him, “That’s against the rules.”

“I’m doing no such thing!” Kija protested, as Jaeha waltzed up and plucked the scale from Yun. “So what’s it supposed to do? Make the consumer uptight? Make their right arm grow huge?”

“You’ll never guess!” Yun taunted excitedly. “It can spark love in someone’s heart!”

Much to Kija’s horror, Jaeha and Hak immediately started cackling like crazy, and even Yona was trying to smother her giggles in her hand. “So what’s up with it being pink?” Hak asked.

“You should have told us your scales could do that.” Jaeha mock-scolded, picking a scale off of Kija’s hand.

“NO THEY DON’T! DON’T JUST PEEL THEM OFF EITHER!” To say Kija was incensed was like saying water was wet. “How dare someone invoke the name of the Holy Hakuryuu-kami for MONEY!? And why did you even buy such a thing Yun?!”

“I didn’t. The guy added it in since I bought to two bags of salt.” Yun said flatly.

“That’s a new one, using the Four Dragons for love charms.” Yona commented. “Though if it was
“A girl should have this, even though Yona-chan doesn’t need it.” Jaeha started to hand it over to Yona as Yun read the paper that came with the ‘scale’. “Actually, it’s not a love charm, but a love potion.”

Jaeha changed his mind and jerked his hand back. “Jaeha, give it here.” Yona said flatly, unamused and suspicious of what trouble such a thing could cause. *Didn’t Guen say his village would sometimes use love potions to get the shyer Hakuryuu to marry and sire children?*

“What’s a love potion?” Kija asked as Hak tried to pry the scale away from Jaeha, ignoring Yona who repeated her demand to hand it over.

Hak, Jaeha, Yona, Guen, Abi, Shuten, Zeno and Kaya (from fifty feet back), and Yun just stared at Kija, like they couldn’t believe such a question came out of his mouth. Shin-ah was hazy as to what exactly a love potion was, but his mask meant no one could see he was just as confused as Kija. *Wouldn’t the matrons give new brides and grooms ‘love potions’ to make the ‘wedding night’ easier?*

Kija’s eyes widened as Yun read the ‘product recommendation’. “But why the scale of Hakuryuu?!?!” He complained, two parts horrified, one part angry, and one part embarrassed. *Why would anyone want someone fawning over them? Hime-sama and Hak are in love and they don’t act like that! But they already knew their feelings…Kija was oblivious to how ‘fawning’ was much his reaction to Yona when they met.*

“Wonder if they’re selling Ryokuryuu scales too?” Jaeha mused as Yun began plotting. “Medicine, poison, or aphrodisiac? Not that the love birds need that last one.” What kept him from calling Yona out on the stains on her clothes that matched the ones on Hak’s was that he really, really didn’t want to point it out. Bad enough having to hear it. *At least I don’t have to feel it like the dragons.*

“Whatever it is, I can sell it for a lot of money.” He decided, holding his hand out for Jaeha to hand it over.

Jaeha was not quite willing to hand it over. “It might be a drug, so lemme test it.”

“No way! It’s dangerous, so let me hold onto it!” Kija argued as Hak once again tried prying the scale from Jaeha.

“Play nice children.”

“Can you really let pass a chance to try out this interesting thing that has fallen into our hands?!?!” Jaeha raged, making Yona sigh.

Standing next to Shin-ah, watching Jaeha give Kija a heart attack over the suggestion of her using the scale and fawning over him, Yona just sighed again. “This won’t end well…”

The moon agreed, while the sun just pulsed amusement at the impending chaos.

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Mutual agreement meant they were all resolved to never speak of the happenings under the influence of Hakuryuu’s scale.

If only Kija could let it go. “Kija, I’m serious, let it go. I’m not upset or angry at you. Do I have to order you to stop apologizing?” Yona asked that evening, sitting in Hak’s lap while Shin-ah continued his stalking of Jaeha while Ao remained attached to Jaeha’s head.
“Better not, he might enjoy it.” Hak muttered in her ear, making her discreetly elbow him.

The next day, Yun took them all to the merchant who had given him the scale. The explanation left everyone a little dumbfounded. “Could you please inform the Elder that while I understand her concerns about ensuring Kija marries, it would be for the best if she suspends her efforts until such time as my constant travels are over?” Yona asked the merchant politely, with a smile that sent chills down everyone’s spines and reminded Hak of how her mother could make Mundok fall in line with just such a smile.

That night, Yona reached for the sun inside. She had never tried communicating directly to him in this way, but with how the bonds had strengthened with everyone now in her heart, it was worth a shot.

She sent the sense of a question, of when he’d join them and what he’d do.

What she received back was an unveiling, suddenly ripping back a cloth hiding something from view, with baffled dragons the result. With it came a question: what would her response be?

She was too giddy with everyone inside to fake not knowing Zeno outright, and pretending that his identity was perfectly obvious was iffy. She sent back as such, to receive encouragement and joy at ‘tricking’ the others, even if it didn’t last long. “Hime-san, stop talking to the sun and go to sleep.” Hak hissed in her ear, mostly asleep.

She settled deeper into his arms, noting how the dark fire was restless.

It needed a Name, but she didn’t know what that name should be.

Somehow Yona contained herself through Jaeha’s joking over being chained, the sulking cat completely at odds with his outward image as he waxed poetic over it. *I-we-us need to see if we can talk to Green Brother; see what can be done to the clan. Shin-ah’s clan acted out of ignorance, and while they acted with good intentions, they can all too easily lead one astray.*

Shin-ah noticed the blond man that he had seen talking to the first Ryokuryuu hiding behind a nearby tree, already drooling over the thought of food. *He glows like the sun. Could he be Ouryuu?* He wondered as Yun and Hak began to set everything up to cook the deer and Jaeha and Kija argued over finding Ouryuu. *If they ask me I'll say something.* He decided as the argument continued, the blond man joining Yona in giving thanks for the deer’s sacrifice.

Something eased inside, and there were familiar growls to her left.

*Zeno*

Kaya was with the other spirits, invisible to everyone but her and Zeno. They had said that Yun had begun noticing them, so they decided to stay invisible, although she knew they’d be popping up to confuse the poor boy.

Hak stared at the weird blond guy enjoying the venison. There was practically hearts floating up as he ate, and he was annoying familiar. *I'm pretty sure he's the guy Hime-san would meet with in the city, but he's familiar in another way.* Something itched in the back of his mind, with the dark fire that had flared to life in Awa. …*Ouryuu?*

“So what’s Ouryuu’s power?” Yun asked, setting out more skewers to cook.
“Hmm…the birth myth says ‘sturdy body’.” Yona commented, passing Ao a piece of meat.

“Maybe he’s a muscle man.” Hak said, more to keep the conversation going than out of genuine belief.


“I’m sure of it.”

“Sure of what?” Yun asked with a blink.

Oh, how do I put this? That kid, eating our meat…we’re almost positive that he’s Ouryuu.” Jaeha said, everyone turning to stare at the blond guy.

“You called?” He lifted his head from his skewer to meet the stares. “Hey, it’s Hakuryuu, Seiryuu, and Ryokuryuu. Looks like we’re all together.” He greeted the others with a bow.

One heartbeat, then two, and then there was chaos. “YOU’RE OURYUU??!!?!” Yun cried, grabbing at Hak’s hair.

“WHY IS HE JUST SITTING THERE EATING OUR MEAT??!!?” Kija exclaimed. “Hime-sama, why aren’t you reacting?”

She blinked at Kija. “Wasn’t it obvious?” She asked.

“Huh? How could you tell by looking at him?” Hak asked. He had a feeling the pair were planning on pulling one on the others, and was done for anything that played with the Monkeys generation two.

Even if Shin-ah was a lot better than his ancestor.

Yona made the mistake of looking at Zeno, and they both cracked, laughing so hard they had to lean on each other to stay upright. “I met Zeno years ago, when I snuck out into Kuuto.” She admitted. “I’m sorry for laughing and not saying anything—“

“Miss shouldn’t lie, you’re not sorry at all for laughing.” Zeno outed her.

“Why haven’t you been at Hime-sama’s side before now??!” Kija exclaimed.

“I wasn’t supposed to leave the castle, let alone sneak out—“

“The guards laughed at Zeno when he asked about joining, and with the priests gone, the only group he could claim family connections to, he had no way to get in.”

“Why would you have had family connections with the priests?” Yun asked, curious.

“Ouryuu was the First Priest of Hiryuu Castle.” Zeno said casually.

“Oh, okay…wait, what?!” Yun and Kija cried as Zeno’s words processed.

“When the dragons went their separate ways, Ouryuu stayed behind at Hiryuu Castle until the young prince came of age, at which time he also left. To keep the peace and reassure the inhabitants who were panicked over the dragons leaving, he acted as a priest, since before he was picked as a dragon warrior he could hear the gods and been one in training.” Zeno explained.
The ‘young prince’ had in fact been Hiryuu’s great-grandson, but they didn’t need to know that.

“The only thing my village recorded about when the dragons went their separate ways is that the first Ouryuu promised to visit my ancestor, but never did. Did yours say why?” Kija asked, sparkling at this chance to learn more about the first generation.

“…not really. But Ouryuu had been the youngest and Hakuryuu the oldest, from what Zeno can recall…” Zeno trailed off. “The first Hakuryuu died before Ouryuu felt comfortable leaving the young prince’s side.”

“More like too scared, but I understand why.” Guen grumbled, unseen and unheard by all but Yona (the reincarnation of his master) and Zeno (his dragon brother).

“Do I need to ask you to join?” Yona asked Zeno, playing with Ao now that he had finished his skewers.

“Nope! I’ve got no plans, and the food’s delicious! You know I make it a hobby to repay food!” Zeno cheered.

“Looks like he beat your time on joining White Snake.” Hak commented to Kija, while Yun muttered, “Shouldn’t that be a policy?”

“So, Ouryuu Zeno,” Kija addressed Zeno. “I am Hakuryuu Kija, with the Right Arm of Hakuryuu. What is your power?”

“Zeno’s power?” He frowned, considering how to put it before deciding to just go with what the myth said. “Zeno isn’t powerful, but his body is strong and sturdy?”

“So how strong is your body?” Hak leapt in, punching Zeno in the jaw, knocking him down. “…that hurt?” Hak questioned as Zeno shivered in terror. Mister punches even harder than when Ha-kun-sama was pregnant!

He wasn’t as puzzled at the outcome as he was letting on, and the meat skewer helped to hide this.

“It would have been far less embarrassing if he had put the meat down.” Abi commented with a sweatdrop.

“It’d be more believable if Raiju was Ouryuu!” Yun declared after examining Zeno’s arm.

“Shouldn’t he have realized by now that logic need not apply when it comes to the dragons?” Shuten asked the others, as Hak played along. “Fine, ya caught me. I’m actually—“

“The only dragon you’d be is the evil dark dragon Ankoukuryuu!” Kija exclaimed, offended for his dragon brother.

Even though he completely agreed with Yun.

The dark flame inside Hak settled, now that it was named.

But more importantly, to Hak at least, is sounded really, really cool. Especially since the Raiju started out the size of a housecat… Hak mused with a smirk.

“Have you no pride as one of the Four Dragon Warriors?! He’s threatening your position!!” Kija demanded of Zeno.

“…no?” Zeno hadn’t felt pride in being a Dragon Warrior since he first drank the dragon’s blood. He
had run through the whole spectrum of emotions about how he felt about it, and now didn’t feel anything in particular about it.

It was just a statement of fact, like how the sky was blue and Hakuryuu would always be the most devoted to the dragon brotherhood.

“You haven’t been training your power, have you?!” Kija accused, finding Zeno’s lackadaisical attitude about the dragons more offensive than Jaeha’s blatant scorn. “You have a duty—“

“Oi, don’t try forcing your views on Ouryuu.” Jaeha cut in, defending Zeno. “It’s his power, not yours.”

“I know! But—“ The Four Dragon Warriors stood with each other, for the first time since that snowy day just outside of Hiryuu Castle’s walls. “In this generation, we’ve finally gathered! This generation is the one that will get to fulfill the desires of our forefathers!” Kija started crying, as much from his own joy as that from the spirits still clinging to him. “I’m just so happy--!”


“I thought it would be a bigger deal, all the Dragon Warriors finally coming together.” Yun commented, eying Yona, who was looking at her dragons with ancient fondness.

They were all in her heart now and physically at her side.

With her spirits out of sight to all but her and Zeno, and the dark flame that was now Hak pulsing warm and happy with a name, she couldn’t be happier.

‘Yona happy. Hiryuu happy.’ She mouthed to herself with a smile, the sun shining warm fondness over the other three.

Chapter End Notes

Kinda thought Yona commenting on running off with Yun would have gotten more of a response but, meh.
Chapter Notes

Okay everyone, my version of the scene between Yona and Zeno after he joins is one I've been sitting on practically since I first had the idea for this story. Meaning I would really, REALLY, like your opinions on it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hak frowned to himself. He *knew* he had broken Zeno’s jaw, having felt the crush of bone. Yet hardly a minute later, Zeno had been speaking normally, with no hint of redness or swelling. Truthfully, what was bothering him more was how utterly *unsurprised* he was at the outcome. *Eh, I’ll see if I can bug Hime-san or Zeno about it. She might have learned of it, since he stuck around after Hiryuu’s death. If they agree to answer me…*

“Miss!”

Turning, her arms full of wood, Yona saw Zeno perched on a branch. Wrapping his legs around it, he spun, somersaulting in the air before spreading out and meeting the ground.

“It was impressive—right until the landing.” Shuten said, taking in the sight of Zeno eagle spread face down in the dirt.

“I wish you’d be more careful Zeno.” Yona scolded gently. “I know you can’t stay hurt…but I don’t want to be so cavalier about your physical safety either.”

“Zeno will try Miss.” He promised, taking some of the wood. “Woah! Heavy!”

Yona giggled. “Kija can handle it all with his right arm.”

“That’s completely beyond Zeno.”

Starting back to the camp, they hadn’t gone very far before she spoke. “I’m glad…you found me worthy of borrowing your power. I…could not have blamed you…if you hadn’t.”

Zeno stopped and turned back to her. “Miss, the first night Zeno visited you, when you were a few months old...he experienced the awakening.” She looked at him, startled despite herself. She had honestly thought that feeling Zeno inside of herself was an artifact from being Hiryuu, despite not recalling such a sensation from that time. “Zeno could not have stayed away from you, all of you, forever, now that your journey has started.” He told her.

“But you wouldn’t be here now if you hadn’t felt I was worthy.” She protested. “I can feel you because of the awakening, but the others would never have felt you if you didn’t allow it.”

Standing there, with Zeno before her and nestled warm in her heart with her other three, Yona began the apology she had never had the courage to voice before. “I’m so sorry…you never got an answer…and were left alone for so long…” The tears started flowed as she bowed her head. “I don’t
know how you don’t have any resentment…”

There was the clatter of wood hitting the ground as she hid her face in her hands, followed by a second clatter as Zeno embraced her, both falling to their knees. “It’s been a long time…since I felt resentment.” He admitted, the seriousness of the moment switching him to first person. “To be honest, for the most part…the resentment got buried under the pain of feeling the others weaken and die…knowing I’d never follow.” Yona had buried her face in his chest, clinging to his jacket. “I never really resented Hiryuu-ou for not telling me. The more I thought about the lack of answer…I realized that there wasn’t a good answer. How can you possibly tell someone that they’ll live forever? That nothing will destroy your body, no matter the source or how much damage it wrecks?

“I’m just glad I realized there was the chance Hiryuu-ou would be reincarnated before too much time passed. After Kaya…left, it gave me hope, to interact with other people, even if it was as a traveler who could never linger.” He told her, rubbing her back.

Silence fell over them as Yona’s tears slowed. Guen, Abi, Shuten and Kaya had retreated some distance away, sensing this was a moment for the two of them.

“That was one of the regrets, beyond leaving the four of you and Ha-kun and Yak-shi…and Yona…but there never was a good way to say it, and with how distressed what you had realized made you already…” She admitted, letting the beat of Zeno’s heart and the warmth of his sun inside her calm her down.

“I don’t feel that there’s anything to forgive but…I accept your apology, in the spirit it’s offered.” He said in response, a few tears of his own leaking into her hair.

Finally Yona let go of Zeno’s jacket, rubbing her eyes with her fists. “You know if Yun ever realizes how long you’ve been around, he’ll never leave you alone with his questions.” She said with a slight smile.

“Eh, Zeno’s more concerned with Hakuryuu’s questions.” He rubbed the back of his head. “He has too much interference from his predecessors to see Guen, even with what the Miss did.”

Picking up the wood, she stood, asking, “I don’t look like I’ve been crying, have I?”

“Just say some dust kicked up and made your eyes water if anyone asks.” Zeno proposed. “The young ones don’t have enough experience feeling the Miss to tell otherwise. The lad has enough tact, and mister…”

“Hak’s the one who’ll nag.” She finished. “It’s hard to lie to him, just like it was hard for Hiryuu to lie to Ha-kun.”

“The mister knows, right? He’d have too, after what happened in Awa. He really is Ankoukuryuu now, isn’t he?” He asked.

“It felt like liquid flame passed between us, after he…y’know…” She blushed, finding it difficult to mention anything sex-related to Zeno. “I’m pretty sure he’s a dragon’s mate now, and I wanted to ask Kaya about it, but it might be different since he’s alive.”

“Zeno’s never heard of a dragon’s mate before, and Ouryuu didn’t say anything when he spoke to Zeno.” He said with a frown.

“Yellow Brother was able to reach you?!” She asked excitedly. “Him-me figured he had gone inside of you, but he could never reach him.”
“More like he had sent a part of himself to be born as a human, so he’d have a vessel if or when he needed to protect Hiryuu-ou. He was able to reach Zeno now because the fire lit. One day…I’ll be able to go to Heaven with everyone.” He explained quietly.

He may not have feelings about being a dragon warrior anymore, but everything was still a tangle over actually being part of a god, let alone a dragon god.

“He had been able to tell you were connected to Yellow Brother somehow, since you felt like him.” She added. “I’m glad that you won’t be trapped here on earth.”

Hak was waiting for them a short distance from the camp. He looked between the pair of them. “…I broke your jaw…” He finally said quietly, ignoring the traces of tears on Yona’s face until they were curled up for the night. “More importantly, I’m not surprised at the outcome.”

Yona and Zeno shared a look, her torch telling him that it was his choice, what he revealed and how much. “The power is less and more than what the myth says. Less because Zeno can still get hurt; more because nothing can permanently harm this body.” He whispered, plastering a beaming smile on his face to enter the light of the fire, dropping his load of wood to cuddle up with the fur/fluff Shin-ah wore on his head. “Zeno wants to sleep with Seiryuu and his fluff!” He cheered, Ao huddling herself in his scarf.

The dark flame pulsed with a mix of curiosity and comprehension as Hak took the wood from Yona.

It wound up being Yun and Kija in the tent that night, Jaeha stubbornly bedding down on the opposite side of the fire from Yona and Hak, despite knowing he’d find his way next to them by morning. Zeno was half huddled in Shin-ah’s fluff, the moon reflecting the sun’s light as he basked in the comfort of another person clinging to him. “How do you handle the fire inside? It’s better since White Snake called me ‘Ankoukuryuu’, but it’s still weird.” Hak hissed into Yona’s ear.

“I can’t really say, since for me it would be weirder to suddenly lose the fire. Even when it wasn’t lit I could still feel the embers of it.” She whispered back.

“…he’s dimmer, but at the same time more intense, than the impression I’m remembering.” He murmured, casting an eye over Zeno.

“He’s been through so much pain, since the time she had known him.” She commented quietly. “At the same time, he’s become closer to Yellow Brother.”

He cocked an eyebrow, but said nothing.

She was waiting in the covered walkway leading to the side gates that snowy morning, her four month old daughter bundled warm in her arms. “I know you said you’d stay, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if you had left.” She told her husband’s yellow monkey as he returned from seeing off the others. “I didn’t expect Bl—Abi to pull himself away from the crypt either.”

“I did promise to stay and I intend to see that through. And Abi realized himself that he couldn’t stay in the crypt forever.” He smiled politely at her, but she could tell it was dimmed by sorrow.

“…you’ll never see them again, will you? And not because of my husband’s memory.” She eyed the yellow one, taking in how the only thing that had changed over the years she had known him were his style of clothes. “But because you can’t go to the same place they will.”

He looked away from her piercing gaze, watching the snow. “So what are you naming her? I know
you said you were waiting until spring to officially name her, with how hard the birthing was for both of you.” He asked, changing the subject.

“Why don’t we get out of the cold first; I’m sure you still feel it as much as the rest of us.” She ordered/suggested, unbundling her daughter from the blanket cocoon once they were settled by a brazier in the resting room attached to her bedroom.

The baby’s eyes blinked open as she realized she had more freedom of movement. While her son had been her miniature in face and coloring, she could see traces of her husband’s face beneath the baby fat. Her already thick head of hair was the color of burnished cherry wood, gleaming with crimson highlights when the light struck it, while her eyes were a cross between her husband’s color and her own.

She settled her down in the yellow one’s arms, as much to be amused at his reactions as for how much she calmed in his arms. “When I was pregnant with Yak-shi, when we discussed names, I only had a suggestion for a boy’s name and he only had a suggestion for a girl’s. That’s the name I went with.” She half-glared at him. “If I tell you, you’d better not spill the news before spring.”

Gulping, he nodded fiercely. “Her name is—“

The scene changed suddenly, and she was old, so very old. Her sense of her long dead husband’s presence around her grew with each day, and with it her certainty that the yellow one—Zeno—would not be staying long past her death. Her great-grandson, while only sixteen, had a firm handle on how to rule, and so her will to fight her rising number of illnesses had lessened. “I’ll beat him up for you.” She promised Zeno, still as youthful as the day they met, when the infamous descended dragon god arrived with his warriors to speak to her about merging her lands with his. “He shouldn’t have left you without answers.”

“You don’t need to, Ha-kun-sama, There…wasn’t a good way to tell me the truth.” Zeno told her, his young hands a welcome warmth around her now bony one.

“I might actually break your jaw, next time. Don’t know if you’ll admit to it though.” She barked a short laugh. “Don’t spend the rest of your countless days alone, alright?” She told him, hinting at the unspoken knowledge she had of his power and his fate. “Don’t just drift between towns and tear yourself up in the meantime.”

Giving her hand a squeeze, he departed with a low bow, unwilling to make a promise he could never keep. Her son, daughter, and great grandson visited her deathbed shortly after. “I hope he stays a little longer, but people are getting more uncomfortable.” Her son admitted.

“I shall miss him, but I must confess to some eagerness in seeing how Kouka grows without its dragon nursemaids.” Her great grandson confessed. “I shall always remain grateful to the security they provided us, but…”

“You want to leave your own mark, out of his shadow.” She completed, to receive an embarrassed nod in response.

Her daughter stayed quiet, and appeared to be fighting tears the whole time.

She dozed off and woke to find them gone with night upon her. Her husband’s presence reached its highest level, to where she could feel it clinging to her side. Closing her eyes, she could feel his weight, and the blazing warmth of his body that even keeping his fire wrapped up could not contain. “You didn’t have to come, let alone stay.” She whispered, so, so very tired.
“Not having to made it even more important that I did do it.” His voice—oh, how she’d forgotten how it made her shiver inside—echoed in her ears again, as the tiredness reached its greatest peak.

Her eyes shot open as she suddenly felt more awake and stronger than she had in years, to be greeted with a brief glimpse of her old cast-off shell, before painfully familiar crimson filled her view. Swept up in her husband’s arms, he spun her around, before pulling back enough to kiss her deeply.

Embarrassingly, she nearly swooned in his arms, having forgotten just how intense it was. Needing air (how strange, needing breathe when she was dead), she pulled back to find them on the highest roof of the castle. “I know I should be sad, leaving all of them behind, but it’s been so long…” She admitted, looking away with a blush.

A hand to her cheek led her gaze back to his face. “We can watch over them together, and be there to greet them when their time comes. But for now, I’ve missed you.”

She couldn’t contain her snort. “Is this where you say that you had nothing to with the ‘personal’ dreams I had after?”

He scratched his cheek, blushing.

Hak jolted awake, the echo of the dream still a shroud on top of him.

The camp was quiet, Jaeha having worked two thirds of the way around the fire pit, with Zeno snoring softly. Shifting, he scooped up Yona as he stood.

One of Zeno’s eyes opened, making him think the snoring was faked. Noting it was just mister with the miss, he closed his eye and the soft snoring started up again.

A little unnerved to realize that Zeno’s appearance now exactly matched that in the dream, Hak settled down with Yona in his lap a short distance from camp, far enough away to not be overheard, but close enough for the others to not panic.

Yona, disturbed by the move, groaned awake. “’ak?” She rubbed at her eyes. “You okay?”

“…just a weird dream.” He said. “But not one I want advertised. I…dreamed of Ha-kun. Well, of her memories, of being her.”

“What did you dream of?” She asked, more awake now with his admittance.

“When the dragons left the castle, save for…” He just flicked his eyes back to camp, where Zeno was. “And then her death. They had a daughter along with a son?”

She nodded. “She was born eight months after him-me’s death. Their last time together in that way.”

“…he really hasn’t changed at all. Though…” He frowned, thinking back to when he had first met her in this life. “He visited that night, didn’t he? That’s why he seemed familiar, when I saw him again in Kuuto. He left a blue stuffed dragon?”

“It started when she was only a few months old. He visited, leaving a crimson stuffed dragon and promising to return with the other four. He brought the blue one the day you met, when you spent the night.” Abi explained.

“He couldn’t keep away, just like the rest of us couldn’t.” Shuten commented.

A cute girl, appearing about Yona’s age joined them. “Hello Hak-sama. I’m Kaya, Zeno’s wife.”
She greeted Hak with a bow.

“Just Hak is fine.” He told her, uncomfortable with the weird sense of déjà vu he was getting from her.

Yona yawned. “Is there anything else from the dream you want to talk about?”

“…not now at least.” He admitted, standing to return to camp.

“I know the masonry keeps the castle warmer than other places, but isn’t it unseasonably cold?” Yona asked Yun in the morning, huddled in her cloak as he stoked the fire to cook a bit of breakfast.

“It should warm up later in the day, but you’re right about the unseasonable part. Mornings aren’t usually this cold until fall.” Yun agreed, Shin-ah shivering despite the fluff on his head.

Suddenly Zeno ran into Shin-ah. “Seiryuu! Let’s have a shoving match to get warm! First one to cry loses!”

Warm sounds good. Shin-ah silently agreed as he ran at Zeno. Kija crawled out of the tent rubbing his eyes. “So much energy…what are you doing?” He asked, watching Zeno and Shin-ah.

“Shoving match! First one to cry loses!” Kija, spurned by the thought of losing at anything, joined in, something Zeno came to regret when he started using his dragon arm. “No fair using your arm Hakuryuu!”

“I wanna join…” Yona complained under her breath, knowing practically everyone present would object to her joining in.

“We can always get warm in a more adult way!” Jaeha proposed with barely contained enthusiasm.

“That’s what I have Hak for. And I thought I was too young to bask in the experience granted by your age?” Yona replied with a faux innocent face as Hak threw a glancing punch to the back of Jaeha’s head.

“HAK! Did you seriously just hit me?!” Truth be told, Jaeha wasn’t surprised about being hit, but latched onto any excuse to ignore being called ‘old’.

Again.

Fed up, Yun finally snapped. “SETTLE DOWN YOU IDIOT RARE BEASTS!!!!” The spirits broke down laughing at the sight of the current dragons frozen in position like a statue game.

“Lad’s scary.” Zeno commented to Hak.

“He’s a self-proclaimed genius pretty boy, so keep on his good side if you want to keep eating good. Or at all.” Hak warned him.

“Now, we have all the Dragon Warriors.” Yun paused impatiently as the assembled group clapped.

“Now there’s the next part of the prophecy, talking about the sword and shield of the sovereign.”

“What prophecy? That mumbo-jumbo Ik-su said?” Hak asked, knowing full well it was.

“YES! Now, just what are the sword and shield? Are they people or physical items? And is the sovereign in the prophecy Yona? Or the current King Su-won?” Yun posed these questions with a raised finger. “We need to go back to Ik-su and see if he can give us any insight about the sword and
shield.”

“Yun, if you want to check up on him that bad, you can just say so.” Yona said with a slight frown. “Not that we shouldn’t consult him about the sword and shield!” She amended herself hastily at his glare.

*I don’t think they would be people, but I hope the sovereign isn’t Su-won; I have enough obstacles and challenges to deal with without adding in supernatural forces on his side.*

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry Yona; even if Su-won has supernatural forces on his side, it's not like he'd believe in them enough to use them.

Okay, rant time. Yona's birthday is at the start of April. She and Hak fall onto Yun and Ik-su a week later. Yun mentions it's been three months since he had seen Ik-su, making it mid-July aka the height of summer. So why is everyone freezing in the mornings and all day when they go to Katan Village? I doubt they had spent so long at Ik-su's place for it to become fall. Is Kouka in the southern hemisphere despite appearing to be what we'd call the Korean peninsula? GAH!!!!
“Y’know, when you said we were going to visit the oracle, you made it sound like we were going to the corner market. It’s taken two weeks!” Jaeha exclaimed, once they were finally in the valley where Ik-su lived.

The journey from Awa across Earth and past Kuuto was…an experience, to say the least.

At least Guen, Abi, Shuten, and Kaya didn’t randomly appear to Yun to freak him out, with as tense as he was about seeing Ik-su again.

“Well we have to take the less traveled roads, so there’s less chance of being spotted.” Yun reminded him.

“It’s like you don’t trust us to not stand out lad!” Zeno exclaimed, getting a dirty look from Yun.

The hardest part was skirting Kuuto, the roads full of merchants pouring into Earth. There had been some kind of festival featuring a mock war between General Geun-tae and Su-won, and now everyone wanted jewelry like the ones they had worn, made from what had previously been thought of as worthless fill from the iron mines.

While Yona was happy that Earth’s economic situation was becoming improved, since there was word of a floral tea of Yun-ho, Geun-tae’s wife, that was a hit to Kai tea merchants, she knew that Su-won had gained Geun-tae’s full loyalty with his moves, as she doubted that he had flat-out stated his intentions, using it as a chance to test the Earth General.

Hak was just happy Su-won hadn’t, in fact, sent soldiers after them, nor did there appear to be any orders to look for them.

“Yellow, we’ve got a former general, four rare beasts, a red-haired princess, and a genius pretty boy. Of course we stand out. And it’s not like you guys care about stuff like ‘discretion’.” Yun said flatly.

Yona had to bite back a smile with that, as for Zeno, ‘standing out’ was what he did when he got bored.

Which was very frequent, as he had seen it all before, but Yun would do well to have a little faith in them. People acting nervous drew more attention than people acting normally, no matter how odd they looked.

"HOW THE HELL IN THE PROGRESS OF A NORMAL DAY CAN YOU TRASH THE HOUSE, NEARLY STARVE TO DEATH, AND TRIP AND BANG YOUR HEAD THIS BAD?!?!?! GIVE UP AND GO TO HEAVEN!!!!!" Yun roared at Ik-su, once he was bandaged up and watered.

“Ah, how I’ve missed your words of concern!” Ik-su said cheerfully, bringing his hands together to pray for thanks.

Yun just let out a wordless scream of frustration, drawing concerned looks from everyone as they cleaned up the mess. “You’ve turned into quite the group.” Ik-su commented, returning Kija’s
greeting bow.

“Ik-su, we want to know about the ‘sword and shield of the sovereign’. What and where are they? And is the ‘sovereign’ Yona or the present King Su-won?” Yun asked with a frown.

“…” Ik-su was silent as he listened. “…there are still things to happen before the sword and shield are revealed.” He finally said.

Yun opened his mouth, to ask about the identity of the sovereign, when suddenly, “Why is everyone avoiding the obvious question?”

All eyes turned to Zeno, unusually (for everyone but Yona and the spirits) serious. “Miss, what do you intend to do now?” He asked her with a glance out of the corner of his eye.

“Zeno knows you gathered the Four Dragon Warriors because you and the mister were chased from the castle after the murder of your father, and you need the help. That’s not a problem. But what will you do now? Do you plan on running forever?”

“No.” Yona stated calmly, the all too familiar (for Hak) ancient look rising in her eyes. Kija, Shin-ah, and Jaeha exchanged baffled looks with each other, while Yun just looked between Yona and Zeno, wondering where all of this was going.

“‘No’? Then…do you plan to have us storm Hiryuu Castle and take back the throne from your cousin?” This question was met with cries of surprise, from the living and the dead.

“Are you crazy?! There’s no way the Dragon Warriors could take a castle! Not with this few people!” Yun protested to Zeno, only to receive a look that cut to the core, making him feel small. “It’s not a matter of can or can’t, but of will.” Zeno continued, his eyes turning to look at Ao in his hands but not really seeing her. “As long as the Miss has the will, what she wants to occur will. Should the power of all Four Dragon Warriors be released…taking a castle is far from impossible.”

Yona found her eyes drawn to the amulet him-her had given Zeno so long ago, to comfort him during the long lonely days yet to come at that time. *No wonder the priests came to gain the power they had.* She mused. *Just being a Dragon Warrior wouldn’t have caused it to the degree it became; he’s very persuasive, and when he’s serious, people listen.*

“Not that Zeno has that kind of power!” Zeno added, making Kija and Yun slump and breaking the serious mood. “Zeno’s following you no matter what, he just wants to know what you’re gonna do.” He said to Yona with a grin. “He doesn’t mean to overstep things as the new guy. But for now: food!”

“So restless.” Yun complained, moving to start lunch when Yona’s voice stopped everyone. “Zeno.”

Eyes on her, she continued. “Taking the castle would shed too much blood on both sides. It is a last resort.” She decreed quietly, making Hak wish for the infinite time that he could show her off to the idiots in the castle, every inch her title.

“That’s all Zeno needs to know.” The amulet glinted in the light as Zeno half-turned to look at her.

“I thought that kid was an idiot. Never expected him to cut into Yona-chan like that.” Jaeha commented to Hak, Kija, and Shin-ah near sunset.

“Agreed. I can’t tell what goes on in his head.” Kija said. “Although I was surprised that Hime-sama had given the option any thought.”
“I know women are full of contradictions, but Yona-chan’s trumping all of them.”

“I’m not; if anything, the contradictions are smaller than before we left the castle.” Hak informed them.

“You’re kidding! They’re already enough to give me whiplash!” Jaeha exclaimed, Kija nodding fervently and quiet agreement from Shin-ah.

“To her father and the court at large, she had no thoughts in her head beyond her hair, dancing, poetry, and fashion. But she never complained about her hair outside their presence; she was dedicated enough to make dance master at thirteen; her poetry books were just slipcovers hiding books on history, politics, strategy, and economics most of the time; plus her fashion as far as I could tell was pretty plain compared what you’d expect from royalty.” Hak elaborated, ticking down the list on his fingers. “She ordered that all leftover food in the castle was to be handed out among the poor and hungry of Kuuto. When she was six. She snuck out into the city at least once a month for years before I found out and insisted on tagging along. I’m still baffled as to how she wound up having tea with Mistress Sayuri once a month.”

“Mistress Sayuri?! She’s the highest ranked courtesan in the country!” Jaeha exclaimed with stars in his eyes. “Do you think—“

“No way. Kuuto is not on the itinerary.” Hak said flatly, to Jaeha’s pout.

“I suppose they are smaller, without having to make a show for the court.” Kija conceded.

“Anything else?”

“Zeno was her informant for at least a few years. She’d have him travel to different parts of the country to get ‘eyes on the ground’ knowledge. Although knowledge of what’s happening is a very different thing from actually seeing it yourself.”

“True. And taking the castle wouldn’t just be about avenging her father, but taking control of the country. A tall order for anyone, let alone a sixteen year old girl.” Jaeha pointed out.

“I’m not sure if it was official, but it was understood that she would marry whomever her father decided to be his heir. She was never expected to rule in her own right.” Hak said. “It’s not a royal decree, and there have been queens regnant in the past…”

“…many challenges…” Shin-ah spoke up.

“Everyone has felt that her Uncle, Prince Yuhon, should have been King to start with, and Su-won’s ascension makes everything right as far as they are concerned. Taking the castle is only step one. To accomplish anything, she has to be confirmed as ruler by the Five General Council, and right now the only Tribe she can count on for support is Wind, and they’re too vulnerable to pressure from Fire.” Hak mused

“How come?” Kija asked.

“The capital of Wind, Fuuga, has only one water source, and it’s a river that flows out of Fire. They already dammed it once, on their side of the border, to get Wind to confirm Su-won’s ascension.” Hak answered.

“The new King, Su-won, what’s he like?” Jaeha asked.

“…who knows?” Hak muttered, stalking off.
“He must hate him a lot.” Kija commented.

“There’s more to it than that. There’s a sense of mournful rage.” Jaeha pointed out.

Yona appeared then, finished with her daily archery practice. “What’s wrong with Hak? He looked ready to punch something.”

“I just asked what this new King is like.” Kija answered, almost defensively.

“Su-won’s a sore point, for both of us. Hak and I…both of us thought that Su-won and I would marry, become King and Queen, and Hak would spend the rest of his life keeping Kouka and us safe. I’ve had a crush on Su-won since I was six, and the only reason all of us are here now, was because I wanted answers as why Father so vehemently rejected Su-won as my husband and his heir. I…just picked the wrong night to ask, and walked in to see Su-won’s sword in Father’s heart.” Yona said mournfully. “I…Su-won came to Awa the day before we left, to investigate the rumors of human trafficking. And guess whom I had to run into on my early morning walk.”

“So you had or have a crush, minimum, on your cousin, but you and Hak are now lovers?” Jaeha couldn’t help pointing out.

“In the perfect world I would have had both of them, as much as they would have had each other.” Yona stated plainly. “Marrying Su-won would mean Hak could stay as our personal guard.”

Kija found himself flushing at the implication, while Jaeha wasn’t sure how to response, something that was happening more often when it came to Yona.

“Are you serious when you say the Four Dragon Warriors could take a castle?!” Guen and Shuten demanded of Zeno that night, Abi, Yona, and Kaya looking on.

“Of course. Shin-ah uses his eyes as an absolute last resort, so his ‘kill count’ would be higher than Abi’s. And I’m fully aware of what I’m capable of, especially now that Ouryuu-kami can reach me. Add in Hak, even if just protecting the Miss and the Lad…We would be storming the source of the Dragon’s Blessing; who knows just how much that would strengthen our power.” Zeno explained.

“Still something to keep in mind.” Abi conceded. “You don’t have to stay hiding, Shin-ah.”

Shin-ah edged out from the tree he had been standing behind, the moon pulsing sheepish. “You don’t need to hide Shin-ah. I know I’m keeping things from the others, but Kija can’t see them, and I don’t know how to bring it up with Jaeha. I’m not sure he’d stay, if I told him that I’ve always known about my past life. I’m sorry I’m taking advantage of your quiet nature, and how you’re not used to talking to people.” Yona apologized, grabbing his hand.

“…I don’t mind. They’re not asking me any questions either, so…” Shin-ah shrugged. “Is Zeno…?”

“Yes, Zeno has always been Ouryuu, ever since the beginning. This body of his can’t be permanently damaged by anything, and he’s had a very long time to try.” Zeno answered.

“I saw you with Shuten, one time, before Awa.” Shin-ah admitted, making Zeno blink. “So I knew
you weren’t someone bad.”

Su-won let himself slump undignified at his desk, glad to be back at Hiryuu Castle. Thanks to his detour to Chi’shin, the first reports on the events in Awa were starting to come in.

But that was for the morning.

Slowly, he pulled out Yona’s book and his translation. “I’m glad you’re alive, both of you.” He whispered, looking at where he had placed Yona’s hair and the headband Hak had worn as a child.

Despite appearing roughed up, likely from fighting Kum-ji with the pirates based on what she said, she looked healthy, the fire that sparked that night blazing bright in her eyes. It would have been nice to see Hak, given the reports on how the Fire Tribe troops had injured him, but Su-won didn’t really have any intentions of surviving such an encounter.

“She mentioned Section III, Verse IX of the law code…” He muttered to himself as he grabbed his copy of the law code, thumbing through to the relevant section.

May he who sells Our people to foreign lands be cast into the sea, forsaken by the homeland he deprived them of.

“That does sound like a fitting fate…” He conceded, staring at the verse for a long moment before setting it aside.

Setting up the books to continue the translation, he paused, remembering the look he had gotten when she realized he had snooped in her room. “She had her hands on them, but didn’t take them…I guess she does want me to continue, for whatever reason.”

The spring he turned sixteen was warm. He had descended in summer, on the day when the Herdsman and the Weaver meet, but his parents had picked his birthday based on his physical appearance, which had been of a three month old child. He had shot up in height, and was glad to have stopped squeaking, no matter how much amusement Guen got out of it. For some reason Yun-an and Yun-mei were very taken with his hair, even though Yun-an always complained about how hard it was to comb. “It’s too pretty to cut! Not with this color!” She had protested when he suggested cutting it, since it gave her so much trouble.

Cousin Zheng, the son of Father’s first cousin Yuhon, was visiting for the celebrations. He was perhaps his favorite cousin, only a couple years older. “Maybe this time you’ll beat me in a fight.” Cousin Zheng teased at his birthday feast.

“Mun-shishou says I’ve gotten better!” He protested with a pout, making Zheng and Guen laugh.

He wasn’t really upset, and was soon laughing with them, dimly aware of his father’s teary-eyed look.

He wished Mother was here too. Even knowing that she was happy and honored in Heaven didn’t change how he missed her.

That evening he headed to Father’s chambers. He had mentioned an engagement, and he wanted to bring up the plans he had been drawing up, to unite Kouka and the neighboring provinces under one banner for safety and security. “Hello Dai-won; aren’t you and Tai-u normally outside Father’s door?” He greeted his father’s normal door guards at the beginning of the hallway.
Zheng-sama wished to have a private talk with Il-sama, so Il-sama asked us to retreat to each end of the hallway. He didn’t say anything about barring people from entering, however.” Dai-won told him with a smile.

Dai-won and Tai-u were a couple of his favorites, for all that he liked all of the guards and servants, mostly because they would sneak him candy when he was younger, and helped him with his footwork when Guen and Mun-shishou were too busy.

Nodding to Dai-won, he continued to his father’s door, finding it partially open. “Really Father? I know you ordered the guards to the ends of the hallway, but at least close the door.” He grumbled, slipping inside.

The room was unusually dark, the lanterns doing little to pierce the gloom the budding thunderstorm brought with it. “Father? Cousin Zheng?” He whispered, inching his way into the chamber, suddenly uneasy.

There was a flash of lightning, illuminating a pair of figures, like a pair of shadow puppets, one with his sword in the other.

Before he could process what he had seen, his father’s body hit the floor in front of him, in time with the boom of thunder. Blood poured from the stab to his heart, and his Spark was completely gone. “Eh, should have asked the guards bar everyone from entering. But two birds with one sword works for me.”

His eyes followed up from his father’s body to the voice.

It was Cousin Zheng, splattered with blood, an ugly look of hate on his face. “What have you done?” He asked faintly, somewhat disconnected from the scene as his dragon self raced Father’s soul up to Mother in Heaven.

“Exactly what it looks like. Cousin Il is dead by my hand, and now you are all that stands between Father and Kouka, mongrel.”

“Mongrel?” He echoed, the fire raging through him as his dragon self was as enraged with the insult as he was. “Here I thought we were friends.”

“A strange baby of unknown origins and unnatural hair color?” Zheng scoffed. “Who or what would ever be friends with something like you? Cheonsa just happening to find a baby after the death of her last one? Either she betrayed the marriage bed or you’re a changeling. It doesn’t matter if Cousin Il adopted you as his own. I would sooner kill you than see Kouka in the hands of a half-breed mongrel.”

Underneath the blatant scorn, he could hear the fear. His fire flowed through his human body, both of them too angry to contain it. It ached, and he latched onto the ache. “Then why don’t we take this outside, and fight for it.” He proposed, leaning down to take his father’s sword without taking his eyes off of Zheng.

“Hiryuu-sama! Il-sama!” Guen and Mun suddenly burst in. “Some of the men have started—“ Mun cut off as he took in the scene.

Guen ran forward towards Zheng, only to be stopped by his arm. “This will be decided in combat. Since you protest my inheritance because I am not of your bloodline, I will prove my right with steel.” Guen and Mun both could not suppress shivers at the tone of his voice. “Don’t try to run. You can’t take all of us.” Hiryuu, son of Il of Kouka warned, a dragon enraged.
Su-won could not continue. “This is... this is like...” *That night. But how? This had to have been written before that night happened! I don’t generally believe in foresight dreams, but could she have seen it? Is that part of why she was so shocked?*

He quickly tidied up the desk and went to bed. His dreams were filled with That Night, with a crimson-haired boy Yona’s age in her place.

Chapter End Notes

So I’ve turned Shin-ah into my Secret Keeper. The fun part is he’d readily tell what he knows, but no one thinks to ask him.
Mun and Guen were tensely quiet as they followed Hiryuu to the training grounds, keeping a firm grip on Zheng. Dai-won and Tai-u took up the rear, pale faced after realizing what the lack of his father and the blood on Zheng meant. “Hiryuu-sama, some of the men began attacking the others. I had them subdued and brought to the training grounds.” Mun hesitantly said.

“How many?”

“...about a fourth of our total. There...were uncomplimentary words directed at yourself and Il-sama in their justification.” Mun replied.

A fourth of the total was seventy five men. “I’m not the only one who does not want a mongrel on the throne.” Zheng, no longer facing the fire in his eyes, piped up, to be ‘accidently’ elbowed by Guen, and ‘accidently’ tripped up by Dai-won’s and Tai-u’s spear ends.

Mun couldn’t bring himself to reprimand them.

The training grounds were muddy, the storm continuing as thunder rumbled in the distance. The men Mun had mentioned were bound and guarded by the rest. Most of them were ones that had been seconded to serve in the castle by Yuhon and/or Zheng, while the small reminder were long-time soldiers, ones who had remained coolly respectful to him.

He had hoped to win them over one day, when he could fight alongside them and gain a measure of trust that way.

It was not to be.

There was grim satisfaction on the faces of the bound men as they caught sight of Zheng. “Il, King of Kouka, is dead at the hand of Zheng, son of Yuhon.” He declared, drawing sounds of shock from those still loyal to him. “Zheng, son of Yuhon, protests my right of inheritance as the son of Il because I am not a natural-born heir. The right of inheritance will be decided by steel.” He decreed formally.

Everyone was taken aback by this declaration. “Hiryuu-sama, Il-sama’s murderer was caught with blooded sword in hand. There is no need to cater to his beliefs.” Mun respectfully protested, as much from worry over his chances as an untested fighter as out of worry for a boy who was almost another son to him.

“The very fact a fair number of men previously believed to be loyal have had to be detained after turning on their comrades in arms makes it all the more important to decide this by steel. Let whatever gods of combat and fate who deign to observe this fight decide the outcome.” Everyone, both loyal and disloyal to him, shifted uncomfortably, not used to the cheerful, curious, naïve prince acting with cold anger.

Everyone present knew the rumor, of how he was the Crimson Dragon God in human form, walking among mortals in answer to the late Queen Cheonsa’s prayer.

In this moment, everyone, even Mun and Guen, who knew just how true the rumor really was, found themselves no longer doubting it.

Hiryuu shed his outer robe for ease of movement. Closing his eyes, he clutched the pendant his yellow brother had given him before leaving Heaven. ‘Watch over me brothers,’ he mouthed to
himself, before nodding to Guen, Dai-won, and Tae-u to release Zheng. “So to what blood will we fight this too, ‘cousin’?” Zheng mockingly addressed him, hiding his terror under bravado that was not entirely unfounded.

“This is a fight to the death, as no other outcome will satisfy you.” He replied coolly, settling into a ready position.

His fire, aching in his blood had dampened, his dragon self reigning it back as logic encroached on their rage. He felt oddly charged, but he knew instinctively that it wouldn’t last, that he had to end this as fast as he could before he, in all likelihood collapsed, his human body not used to his fire coursing through it.

It was a hard fight, Zheng having several inches of height and reach on him, the mud making both of them slip.

But he was still small enough to slip under his blows, and he had more at stake. The whole human life he had built was at risk, and he knew that if he lost, more people would die, as Yuhon and Zheng would purge anyone loyal to him and his father and fight with their allies, believing in the power of the sword more than the power of words.

People would die if he won, but far, far more would die if he lost. He could feel his dragon brothers watching, and that spurned him on, wanting to show that this was more than a youthful folly or fire-induced restlessness.

Ducking under Zheng’s sword, losing several inches of hair, he caught him across the chest, cutting a line from hip to shoulder. Zheng fell, and he stood over him, panting and now aware of where Zheng’s blade had gotten through his guard and nicked and cut him.

Zheng was still alive, coughing blood. Swallowing bile, he cut through bone and muscle, beheading Zheng as smoothly as he could, fight fever letting him accomplish it in one stroke.

Breathing through his mouth, as no one mentioned bodies could decide to have one last bowel movement, he lifted the head of someone he had once trusted up for all to see. “Zheng son of Yuhon is dead for challenging my right to the throne and for the murder of King Il of Kouka. Is there any who would take up his sword and cause?” He asked, reminding himself that it was very, very essential that he not pass out or fall.

Distant thunder was his only answer. “The King is dead. Long live the King.” Mun declared, leading those present in acknowledging the new king, the prisoners being forced down. “What of those who attacked Your men in support of Zheng son of Yuhon?” Mun asked formally.

Biting his lip, he closed his eyes and gave the order. “Kill them. Their families are not to be harmed, as I will not hold apparent innocents in account of their betrayal without evidence of aid.” I’m sorry Father. He whispered inside himself as he made himself watch the executions. I know spilling more blood is the last thing you would want, let alone my first kill being so young.

But if I am to develop that impossible dream of yours, of uniting the kingdoms and provinces together in a land where people can live peacefully without worry of offending the wrong lord, I have to make sure my own household is united.

Su-won uncomfortably stowed away the books in his robes. I know people had apparently opposed him, but I would never think it was because of being a ‘mongrel’. Or that it started that young. Knowing that she is capable of conceiving of actions like this makes me wonder if this will be my fate
one day, but at Hak’s hands.

Reaching for the Awa reports, he paused halfway as he thought of something. Pulling out the translation, he flipped back to the most recent section.

How he had translated ‘Yuhon’ was the exact same way his father’s name was written. I know he scared her since he was so stern compared to her own father, but that wouldn’t be reason enough to make him an apparent enemy of Hiryuu-ou…

…right?

It was a lazy day, the day after they arrived at Ik-su’s house. Well, lazy for everyone but Yun, who was whirling through the house and storehouse like a typhoon, putting everything back to an order that satisfied him and muttering about idiot clumsy oracles the whole time.

Zeno disappeared after breakfast, but Yona knew he was going for some ‘alone’ time with Kaya. Since Zeno slept clinging to Shin-ah and his fluff, it wasn’t very conducive for the kind of ‘alone’ time the two eternal teenagers were used to.

She debated bugging Hak to start (re-)teaching her swords, but she didn’t have a sword of her own yet, and since she needed to go to Fuuga to speak to Mundok, she could get one there.

“Shin-ah, will you go with me and Hak to Fuuga tomorrow? I need to talk to Mundok, the Wind Elder, but we’re too big a group for everyone to sneak into Fuuga, but I need to take a dragon with me so the others can feel where we went.” Yona asked in the afternoon.

“…not Zeno?”

She looked a little sheepish. “Kija, Yun, and Jaeha are more likely to ask Zeno where we went then you?” She admitted. “And I want to hopefully get answers from Mundok before asking Zeno and my spirits.”

Thinking about it, Shin-ah nodded. “…alright.” Maybe I can ask about that dark fire I’ve seen inside Hak since Awa.

Next obstacle was to ask Hak. “I need to go to Fuuga and speak to Mundok. I need answers about Father’s policies, why Uncle was passed over, and if he was aware of how forcefully Father opposed Su-won as my husband and the next King.” She informed him bluntly. “I want you to go with me along with one of dragons. A group of three is less attention getting than one of seven, and it’s probably for the best to keep word of the return of the Four Dragon Warriors quiet for now.”

“Since you’re practically ordering this than I have no choice. You’re forgetting one other thing to do in Fuuga.” He reminded her with a heated look. “Betrothal.”

She couldn’t quite contain her blush as she nodded in agreement.

Yun, worn out from his furious whirl of activity the day before, was rudely awakened by Kija’s screeching. “HIME-SAMA IS GONE!”

Still half asleep, he sat up, to see Kija freaking out. “Calm down; the torch isn’t panicked, so maybe she went to the privy. Though since Hak is gone too…” Jaeha trailed off with a smirk.

“Miss and Mister went with Seiryuu to Fuuga.” Zeno told the others, cutting off Kija’s panic. “A
group of three draws less attention than a group of seven, and by taking Seiryuu, the rest of us can feel where they went.”

“Why take Shin-ah? He stands out too much with that mask of his!” Yun exclaimed. *Am I the only one who considers how much we all stand out?!

“He won’t offend Elder Mundok, by accident or on purpose.” Zeno bit back a snicker at the look on Kija’s and Jaeha’s faces at the implication they would offend Mundok.

Hak was quietly relieved that she had picked Shin-ah to go with them. He didn’t really get along with White Snake or Droopy Eyes, and he still felt uncomfortable around Zeno, mostly because of the extreme déjà vu. “Hak, you’ll have to deal with it sooner or later.” Yona reminded him.

Hak couldn’t help casting an eye at Shin-ah. “…no one asks me anything. And I can see them.” Shin-ah answered the unspoken question, turning his head slightly so Hak could see he was looking at Abi and Shuten.

“So next to Zeno you probably know the most?” Hak asked, receiving a nod.

At mid-morning they were at the walls of Fuuga. “…guards asleep…” Shin-ah said, making Yona latch onto Hak’s arm to forcefully drag him away from waking them up. “What part of ‘sneak in’ is the problem?”

Rolling his eyes, Hak just heaved her over his shoulder to scale the wall.

Tae-yeon was waiting for them outside the manor. “The pretty lady told me you were coming again!” He exclaimed, leading them to the Elder’s private study. “I’ll get Grandpa!” He exclaimed, taking off down the hallway, ignoring Hak’s reprimand of ‘No Running!’

Mundok couldn’t quite hide his surprise at how much Yona had changed in the three months since he last saw her, her much shorter hair being just the most visible change.

She carried herself differently, more fully demonstrating the hard work and talent that had convinced the highly critical senior dance master Mai to rank her as a dance master so young. Her fingers bore the calluses formed by archery practice, indicating the quiver tucked in the corner next to the masked swordsman was hers. Embers smoldered and danced in her irises. “It is good to see you, Yona-hime.” He greeted her. “Especially given the rumors.”

“Of mine and Hak’s demise?”

“Yes, not that I’ve believed them, with the lack of any sort of official statement, but that means little in the face of worry.” Looking between Yona and Hak, Mundok narrowed his eye. He had no reason to think so, but he had a suspicion… “May I ask what brings you to my home? Did you accomplish what you had intended to do?”

“Yes. I’m not sure where I’ll be going next, but there are things I need to ask you.”

“Like what?”

“What were Father’s long-term goals? As far as I know, he was more concerned with keeping the peace, but I was wondering if you knew more.”

“‘Keeping the peace’ was pretty much his official policy. He was an interim king, and he knew it.”
“Huh?” Yona questioned with a blink.

“His Late Majesty Ju-nam did a lot of work beforehand to make sure your father would be approved as king. I don’t know how he convinced the others, given Prince Yuhon’s popularity, but in my case, I already had personal doubts about his abilities off of the battlefield.”

“Why?” Hak asked.

“His default response to any slight or insult was violence, no matter how minor. There was talk among his circle of installing a universal conscription, like in Fire, and he likely would have browbeaten any opposition from the generals.”

“It doesn’t matter how much land we have if there’s only women, children, and old men to run the economy. Hungry people are angry people.” Hak commented.

“The oracle said that Uncle turned against the priests after his betrothed died. I don’t doubt his honesty, but do you know anything about this?” Yona asked.

Mundok sighed heavily. “His betrothed, your mother’s eldest sister, had been the only one who could persuade him to change his mind on anything. While I don’t know if that was in fact the cause, it would not surprise me. He was a better man with her in his life.”

“But Su-won is his opposite in temperament, so that doesn’t explain why Father would oppose him as my husband and his heir so forcefully.” Yona pondered out loud.

Mundok, who had been taking a slip of tea, choked on it. “What the--?!”

“You didn’t know?” Hak questioned. “His Majesty’s protest had been surprisingly strong to us, but you didn’t know anything about it either Gramps?”

Mundok slowly shook his head. “…no. While I knew nothing about his choice for your husband, I had assumed, like most in court circles, it would be Su-won.”

“By my own reckoning, Su-won was the best candidate, with Hak being a close second, Su-won edging him out by being of royal blood. Father had framed it as Su-won not being someone he could give me, and to consider his feelings, but the forcefulness with which he protested…” Yona elaborated.

Mundok couldn’t quite contain his surprise at how Hak was Yona’s second choice. “I was not aware of any feelings you have for Hak, although his own are perfectly obvious and I would naturally have been open to such an alliance.” Without meaning to, his eye flicked over to the masked swordsman in the corner.

Noticing his gaze shift, Yona said, “Seiryuu Shin-ah has my complete trust.”

With a brief hesitation on his part, Shin-ah moved his mask over enough for Mundok to see she was telling the truth, revealing one of his eyes and some of his hair, before replacing it. Yona had been adamant that Shin-ah did not need to do so if he felt uncomfortable with the idea and showing his hair color would be enough, but he knew of her unspoken hope that one day he would feel comfortable without his mask, and he had to start somewhere.

Noticing his gaze shift, Yona continued. “My whole life, I’ve had to be careful not to lose myself in the memories of before, and I spent too much time worrying about establishing ‘Yona’ as separate from ‘Hiryuu’. Part of that was not letting the past blind me to present options. Hak’s past life had been extremely important to Hiryuu, and those feelings carried forward. What the
two of us have now is its own thing, and I could honestly never picture marriage to Su-won without Hak present in some form, as our guard or in a more…’illicit’ fashion.”

“When you say ‘extremely important’, how ‘extremely’ are you talking?” Mundok asked.

Mischief sparked in Yona’s eyes. “Technically speaking, the eternal fidelity promised by the future Wind Clan only applied to the leader Hiryuu defeated, as she became his wife and Queen.”

Mundok, halfway through refilling his cup, dropped the teapot with that. “Wait, you’re saying--?!?”

Hak sighed. “Yes, I had been Hiryuu-ou’s wife and Queen in my past life. And no, Hime-san didn’t tell me either, just confirmed my guess.”

“…no wonder you didn’t want to let Hak go when you first met, and why Hak actually tolerated you clinging to him.” Was all Mundok said.

“Keep this up and I’ll beg Hime-san to reveal who if anyone you’d been in Hiryuu’s time.” Hak threatened with narrowed eyes.

“We’re getting off track, and there is still one more question I have.” Yona broke up the brewing fight and drew attention back to her.

“Su-won, he…he claimed Father had killed Uncle. Do you…?” Yona asked softly.

Mundok merely looked away, his action an answer in itself.

Before Hak could start stuttering protests and questions, Yona spoke. “…I told myself it didn’t matter, the truth of it, since what mattered more was Su-won’s belief in it, but I…I…”

She hid her head in Hak’s chest as he swept her up into a hug. Shin-ah rose and joined Hak in embracing her, while Ao offered her nuts as she fought against open sobs.

Mundok busied himself, digging out the documents related to that event as she calmed.

Finally she pulled back. Wiping her face, she simply said, “Why.”

“It has to do with the events of Queen Cheonsa’s murder.” Mundok started, only for Hak to interrupt. “We had speculated a connection, but he really was involved?”

“More than involved. He was the sole attacker.” Mundok slid over the bundle of papers. “His Majesty asked me to discreetly investigate, outside the purview of the official investigation that was headed by Yuhon-sama.”

The top paper was a diagram of the hallway outside of what had been her room at the time, bold red ink marking blood trails. A circle was marked, and the note read, ‘dagger found’. ‘Yuhon-sama claimed there had been reports of an intruder in the area, and was seen running back shouting about such. Nonesuch person was ever found. Most interestingly were the wounds he sustained fighting the ‘intruder’ while attempting to ‘defend’ the Queen. While the wounds on his torso could have come from a sword, the one to his calf could only have been caused by a dagger. There were several people who remembered him pulling the dagger from his leg, claiming she had hit him by mistake during the struggle. But the biggest source of information came in this letter.” The paper below the diagram bore the seal of the High Priest of Hiryuu Castle, and was signed Ouryuu. “It was followed up by a visit that affirmed the contents of the letter.”

“…he had been coming to kill me.” She stated quietly, tracing the character for ‘yellow’ in ‘Ouryuu’.
“But Mother would not let him, and died to stop him.” Silent tears now fell. “I had feared this was the case. So Father killed Uncle in secret so Aunt Yon-hi and Su-won would not be executed as the kin of a traitor?”

“Not just because of that.” Mundok began explaining. “There was enough discontent simmering over His Majesty’s ascension, and enough eyes from other countries on us that a public execution could fan the flames. There were those who presumed he had done a secret deal with Ju-nam-sama to gain the throne, and executing his brother and his family for murdering the Queen…”

“Chaos. No matter how much evidence Father could bring to bear, it would betray insecurity in his position for there to be a public execution.” Yona continued. “What had the letter’s author recommended during his visit?”

“He advised that should Yuhon-sama make a second attempt on your life, he would not survive it. He felt that he had no right to decide his fate outside of that instance, should it occur. But Yuhon-sama could not remain alive, not if you were to survive.” Mundok answered. “I accompanied His Majesty when he went to his brother with the evidence and the execution order.”

“So there does exist an execution order. How…how did Uncle react?” Yona tentatively asked.

“He raged, but in the face of everything…he had always maintained the sovereign was the supreme authority. And given how the secret execution would allow for Lady Yon-hi and Su-won-sama to live…he did care for her, and Su-won was perhaps the one person to bring some light back into his life after the loss of his betrothed. His stipulations were that…wait…” Mundok paused, as he remembered something he had disregarded at the time. “His first stipulation was that His Majesty never touch a weapon again, even if his life was in danger. The second, was that when Su-won-sama came to kill him…he would permit it.”

Yona and Shin-ah gaped at Mundok, while Hak sighed. “I hadn’t wanted to think that was possible.”

“What I don’t understand is how Su-won-sama found out. Everything was done with the strictest secrecy, and while the author of the letter likely knew of His Majesty’s intentions, he was the last person to reveal anything.” Mundok wondered, baffled.

“So you were the only witness?” Yona asked.

“Yes. An execution order technically requires the generals present for it to be legal, although the number of generals isn’t stated. I’m certain there was no one else in the area.”

“We’ll worry about how Su-won learned of it once we’re in a position to have him answer. Where is the execution order?” Yona asked firmly.

“A copy is in the King’s Secret Archives. The original, along with Yuhon-sama’s signed confession of Cheonsa-sama’s murder during his attempt to kill you, was placed in my safe keeping. Had Il-sama died peacefully in his sleep, or you ascended the throne successfully without challenge, I was to burn all the records in my keeping.”

“One question. Would Su-won have learned you were present? I find it hard to believe that he’d learn of Prince Yuhon’s murder without learning of any witnesses.” Hak asked, ignoring Mundok’s dirty look from dropping ‘-sama’ from Su-won’s name.

“Su-won’s not going to admit by his own will that he killed Father in public, let alone that Father had killed Uncle. He also respects you, Mundok, a great deal. I would think he’d only bring that into play if you confronted him directly about Father’s murder, if whomever he learned it from was aware of
it, and that can’t happen at present.” Yona remarked. “Hold it, you never did explain why Father was an ‘interim king.’”

“Had he lived longer, to when you reached your teens, Ju-nam-sama likely would have passed over Yuhon-sama and Il-sama and named you as his heir directly. He never fully recovered from wounds he received in his youth, and knew he likely wouldn’t last that long. Even if he had, there would still need to be a regent until you came of age, and that would have fallen to Il-sama. While Ju-nam-sama never articulated to me his full reasoning for passing over Yuhon-sama, he did convey to me that Il-sama was to preserve the kingdom no matter what. Even if it meant sacrificing the land gained during his reign…even if it meant hardship for the people…the preservation of the kingdom was the greatest priority, until such time as you could claim your throne.” Mundok said.

Yona rubbed her temples. “This is turning into a bigger mess. Su-won has gained Earth’s loyalty, so I’m down to Wind and maybe Water. Truthfully, support for my claim, should such time as I can return to Hiryuu Castle come, would be more important than outright loyalty. I don’t know enough about the Earth General to say if he would balk at Su-won’s actions. Kan Su-jin’s death would help too, but any action Su-won takes afterwards would likely bind Fire to his banner further. I just hope storming the castle doesn’t become a necessity.”

“Wait, so the Four Dragon Warriors could take Hiryuu Castle?” Hak asked. “He wasn’t just saying that?”

“If anything, it would be ridiculously easy compared to storming any other castle. It is the focus for the dragon’s power, and the site of the Dragon’s Gods descent and the creation of the Four Dragon Warriors. Kouka’s traditional borders mark the extent of the dragons’ blessing, and all of it is focused on Hiryuu Castle. Their power would be magnified, although by how much I can’t say. It’d be even easier with this generation, since Seiryuu’s power is now a last resort. But like I said to Zeno, it would shed too much blood, so it is the absolute last resort.” Yona explained. “Wait…you said Grandfather made Father his heir partly so I could inherit when the time came. But I never had any indications from Father that I was to rule in my own name. The impression I had received was that I would bestow legitimacy on whomever Father decided to be his heir. I had to teach myself the subjects I should have been studying.”

“She’s right; he never gave any signs of expecting her to rule herself.” Hak confirmed.

“He never indicated otherwise to me. When I broached the subject of training you to rule, he merely said that it was more important to create happy memories for the dark days to come.” Mundok answered. “Whether he knew you would teaching yourself from his sources or assumed you would remember enough from Hiryuu-ou I can’t say. Peace-loving he was, and a fool he appeared, his intelligence network was vast.”

“…he would have learned of Su-won’s plans beforehand, and in keeping with what he promised Uncle, did not try to dissuade him from his course.” Yona murmured to herself, picking up her now cold tea to finish.
“Tae-u is already eagerly awaiting the day you resume the position of Wind General.” Mundok told Hak sometime later, after a fresh pot of tea and snacks were brought in.

“Unfortunately Hak can’t really reassume the position of General of the Wind Tribe when the time comes. It would be poor form for my consort to outright have such a position in any Tribe.” Yona stated. “I know by all rights it should be Su-won suggesting this as my eldest surviving male relative, but I wish to propose to you a Contract of Betrothal between Hak and myself. I doubt you’ve removed his name from the clan rolles, so for this he is still your heir and leader of Wind.”

Mundok couldn’t disguise the surprise. “It has only been three months since you hoped for a marriage to Su-won-sama, and yet you want to enter into a contract with Hak?”

“As I said, the feelings from that time carried forward, for all that what we have now is its own thing. My feelings for Su-won are still there, just as my feelings for Hak had been before. The primary difference now is that I’ve firmly established within myself who ‘Yona’ is in relation to ‘Hiryuu’. I’ve wasted too much time as it is.” She explained, Ao stealing a sweet rice cracker from Mundok’s plate. “I had just hoped Su-won would have been with us, but the chances of that died with Father on Su-won’s sword.”

“The betrothal was my idea Gramps. A girl who can have anyone wanting me, an orphan of unknown background? I’d be an idiot to refuse.” Hak pointed out.

“Don’t you dare tell me you’ve defiled her.” Mundok glared.

“You’re the one saying it, not me.”

“‘Her’ is RIGHT HERE, gentlemen.” She said sternly. “Hak is My Consort, with or without a formal betrothal contract. You are the only parental or grandparent-type figure either of us has left, so you are the one whose presence for the betrothal matters the most.”

“You may as well spend the night. It will take time to draw up the contract.” Mundok diverted, taken aback by her fierce declaration and touched at her desire that he be present for the betrothal.

“Shin-ah, can you go back and bring the others? I’ll leave it up to Ik-su, whether or not he feels comfortable enough coming and offering a blessing, but I do want Kija, Jaeha, Zeno, and Yun to come. Even more so since this is no longer a one day trip.” Yona asked.

Nodding, Shin-ah stood. Bowing in departure, mostly to Mundok, he left.

“I know there are things you did not want to ask with Shin-ah here.” Yona directed at Mundok.

“…you do not seem surprised at the letter’s author. Or its contents.” He finally commented.

“Zeno has visited me since I was a baby. Just as I’ve always remembered who I had been, I always knew who he was. In the months before she died, I couldn’t go to sleep unless Mother held my hand, since Hiryuu had also lost his mother at that age. I know she and Zeno would switch positions once I was asleep. I would have been more surprised if he hadn’t been there. He had been living in the abandoned priests’ quarters since his first visit.” She explained.

“You are more sure of yourself.” He commented.
“Hiryuu’s fire awoke within me that night. I had to establish who ‘Yona’ was in relation to ‘Hiryuu’, so I no longer doubt what is me and what is him. And I…don’t have to pretend anymore, to be an utterly ignorant girl.”

“You do realize that if he comes, someone is gonna have to carry the oracle if they want to get him here in one piece, right?” Hak reminded her.

“I know. I don’t think they’ll get here until some time tonight.” She admitted.

“Well Tae-yeon will be happy you are staying for a short time.” Mundok commented, rising to show Yona the room she would be staying in.

“Wow I never thought you would have a husband sister! Never mind one with hair longer than yours!” Her little brother exclaimed.

“Yeon! Be polite!” She scolded, only to hear muffled chuckles behind her.

“Well I never thought my wife would have a sibling nearly as pretty as she is, so we’re even.” He told Yeon, leaning down to look in his eyes. She couldn’t suppress the blush that rose up over being called ‘pretty’. “My name is Hiryuu.”

“I’m Yeon, and I can’t be pretty; I’m a boy!” The six year old protested.

“Why not? My nurse has always commented on how pretty my hair is, so if my hair is pretty, doesn’t that make me pretty?” Her husband of a month countered. “So boys can be pretty.”

“But sister is prettier.” Yeon insisted.

That gained an outright laugh from Hiryuu. “That is she.”

She wanted to sink into the ground. ‘Pretty’ was for other women.

Going to sleep was surprisingly hard, being alone in her bed. True, her husband hadn’t done anything in the marriage bed yet, but he was the sort that evidently preferred sharing a bed with his wife no matter if martial relations happened or not.

Some time later she jolted awake, suddenly aware of someone in the room with her. “Ow.”

“What kind of man says ‘ow’?” She asked as she sat up.

He had stubbed a toe on the platform her bed rested on. “…the kind of man who can’t get to sleep without his wife?” He posed sheepishly, clutching the injured digit.

Rolling her eyes, she pulled back the covers in silent permission. “I know why it took me so long; I didn’t have my heat source.” She declared once he was lying next to her, his chest touching her back.

She didn’t even need to turn around to know he was pouting. “Is that all I’m good for?”

She didn’t answer him, just grabbing an arm to drape over her.

She found herself awake again, as a little voice came from the door. “Sister?”

“Yeon?” She sat up again. “A nightmare?”
He padded over to her bed and climbed in on the other side from Hiryuu. “Yeah…Grandfather said I shouldn’t come to you if I had one while you were here, since your husband might be in bed with you…but...”

“Right now I’m not her husband, I’m her heat source.” Hiryuu looked at Yeon over her shoulder. “I don’t mind, and if I don’t mind, then your grandfather isn’t allowed to complain.”

“Was it the one with Father?” She asked.

Yeon slowly shook his head. “No…I couldn’t breathe, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t get any air…then I was looking at myself, and everyone was crying, and this round thing like a balloon was there with a flute or recorder, and I could run as much as I wanted…”

“The Piper…” Her husband whispered. “He eases the souls of children who die, so they can make the trek to Heaven...”

“Isn’t it supposed to be a bad thing if you see him as a child?” Yeon asked.

“But you dreamed of him, you didn’t actually see him. I saw him as a child, when my nurse’s daughter died, and I’m still around, so I think you’re safe.” He assured Yeon.

“Did you really see the Piper? Or were you just trying to reassure Yeon?” She asked on the way back to Hiryuu Castle a week later.

“I did see him. What Yeon described…it sounded like when she died. My nurse’s first daughter, An. She was just a little younger than me. Something about him...reminds me of her.”

“Reincarnation?” She asked.

“Maybe.” He smiled at her. “I hope when he’s older he can come visit us in the castle. Mother was the only surviving child in her family, and Father’s sister was too far away to visit, so I never really had aunts or uncles around.”

Shifting, she looked out the window of the carriage, her face oddly hot. “…do you really think I’m pretty?” She found herself whispering. “I’m everything a woman shouldn’t be; quarrelsome, loud, lacking female accomplishments...” She ran her thumb over the calluses and faint scars on her hands. “…scarred...”

He gently took her hand in his. “All of that makes you a person, not a doll like the other potential queens and consorts were. I feel reassured, knowing that should the worst happen and I fail in my duty to protect you and our children, you will be able to defend yourself and them.” She couldn’t suppress her shiver as his thumb tranced her calluses. “A flawless piece of jade may be prized for its purity, but I’d rather have a piece full of flaws, because they form a beauty all their own, and tell a story the flawless stone lacks. So yes, you are pretty, not in spite of the scars, but because of them.” The look in his eyes told her that he was completely serious about his words.

“King, that is not how you seduce a woman.” The green monkey poked his head in from the roof of the carriage. “You’re supposed to wax poetic about her beauty, not say that you like her because she’s scarred.”

Growling, she lunged at him, aiming to grab his ponytail, but he leapt away. “I’m going to kill him one day.” She warned.

“Was I supposed to be saying all of that...poetically?” Her husband blinked owlishly. “Why say a poem instead of speaking plainly?”
She stared at him, “...you’re an idiot.” She informed him bluntly.

“EH?!?!” She forced herself to ignore how endearing his baffled face was as the carriage came to a stop, back at the castle that was now her home.

Opening his eyes, Hak found he had gained two guests during the night; Yona and Tae-yeon. Tae-yeon was snuggled in Yona’s arms, while he was draped over both of them, seeking the extra heat Yona put out since the fire lit.

Smiling at the pair who were the most important people in his life, he let himself drift off to sleep again.

It took a moment for Yona to remember where she was, when she woke up shortly past dawn. Unbearably restless without her dragons and Hak near, she had left the room Mundok had taken her too, following the sense of the dark fire to Hak’s room.

She ran into Tae-yeon just outside his door. “Can’t sleep?” She whispered, leaning down.

“...yeah.” He admitted, smothering a yawn. “Can you see the pretty lady too? The one who looks like Hak-nii-sama?”

“I can’t see her now, but I know who she is.” She answered quietly, sliding open the door enough for both of them to slip inside.

Why does the Wind Tribe like having their leaders sleep on platforms? She wondered, managing to not run into the edge of the platform. “Next question, who get the middle?” She asked him.

“Grandpa said that when you share a bed with a lady, you let them pick. But for some reason he said he’d explain ‘sharing a bed with a lady’ when I’m older.” Tae-yeon commented, pouting at the end.

“Would you mind snuggling with me? It’s...hard to sleep without being able to hear his heartbeat.” She admitted.

“You’re Hak-nii-sama’s precious person, so I’d never mind!” He exclaimed quietly, unbearably cute. And this time, she could snuggle him up as much as she wanted!

Carefully, she worked her way out from between Hak and Tae-yeon, remembering times long past. Looking back, Tae-yeon claimed her spot as she slid the door closed.

Running fingers through her hair to put it in some sense of order, she debated going back to where she should have been sleeping, but her feet led her to the veranda, where Mundok sat with his early morning tea. “I take it putting you in separate rooms is an exercise in futility?” He commented, pouring her a cup with raised eyebrow.

“I sleep better, feeling him next to me.” Was all she said, accepting the cup. “They’ll be here soon.”

“Mass chaos then?”

“Yun is convinced we stand out far too much.” She said in lieu of an answer. “…if you are truly against signing a contract at this point, we can wait.”

“You’ve already admitted that a formal contract is mostly for my sake and for prying eyes to come.” He reminded her. “If I ask if certain things have passed between the two of you, will you answer?”
“Will you refrain from attacking Hak if I do?” She retorted.

Slowly, he nodded. “We joined the pirates fighting against Yan Kum-ji in Awa. He was involved in human trafficking and drug running. In order to locate the latest batch of girls to be sold, someone had to sneak in, so they could signal to the others the right ship. I knew things could go wrong, and help might not come in time. So before I snuck into the girls, I gave one of the two things they could have taken from me to Hak, leaving only my life to take.” She explained simply. “We know the consequence, and how the sure way to avoid it is to not do it. Without evidence, nothing can be proven, only speculated. I cannot bring forth any sort of new life until I can be sure this will not continue into the next generation.”

Mundok had to admit to himself that such a situation was one beyond any implications of defilement. “Your father would be proud to see you become strong.”

“Even though I must defy his orders and take up weapons? I don’t regret striking down Kum-ji, but I know I might have to strike down Su-won, and potentially countless others between then and now.” She asked.

“Yes, even though it means going against what he had wanted for you. I cannot say for certain, but I believe that he knew what he wanted for you was not something that could survive him. Il-sama was not so foolish as to believe you could survive any dark days without taking up weapons.” He assured her.

“Do you know why Father did not bring the priests back after Uncle’s death? I know Uncle was responsible for them being expelled from the castle, but what has kept them from returning with his death?” She asked, refilling their cups.

“Yuhon-sama led the initiative, but many in the council were in favor of such a move, and likely would have prevented their return, if Il-sama had tried bringing them back. Brash as he was, Yuhon-sama said what many wanted to hear, and that included expelling the priests. Add in the military support…”

“I theorized that Grandfather used the political capital he still had to ensure Father’s ascension, and to avoid a civil war over them.” She commented.

“Su-won-sama is not of a mind to bring them back either. He takes after his father in those matters.” He added.

Zeno tumbled into the courtyard, dirty. “I thought you guys would come last night.” Yona said as he stood, dusting himself off.

“It took so long to convince the lad that it was near nightfall, so everyone just decided to come in the morning! Ryokuryuu is having too much fun taunting the guards by poking them and leaping away before they open their eyes, and the lad is plotting how to get in unseen.” Zeno explained.

Yona couldn’t contain her face palm. “Get Shin-ah to grab Yun and just climb the wall. And tell Jaeha to stop; it’s Mundok’s and Hak’s job to poke the guards when they fall asleep on duty.” She ordered, rising to get dressed and get Hak up.

Returning to her designated room, she was pleasantly surprised to find the clothes she had worn on her birthday, and arrived to Fuuga in, waiting for her. “It’s strange, how quickly I’ve gotten used to not wearing silk.” She commented to Kaya, who had joined her.

“Things have happened so fast, that you could only hang on.” Kaya pointed out, reveling in the feel
of silk as she handed Yona each piece.

Yona frowned. “Is it me, or can you hold things longer? And easier?”

Kaya started when she realized Yona was right. “I haven’t been consciously thinking about picking things up…but Zeno can touch me, since Ouryuu-kami reached him.”

“Well, I wonder if that has anything to do with it?” Yona pondered, shrugging as she tied the sash cord. “Better go save Mundok from the chaos of the Dragon Warriors.”

It was not as much chaos in the dining room as she had feared, as someone had managed to impress on Jaeha (the most likely source of trouble) the importance of behaving himself. Tae-yeon looked at Shin-ah with quiet awe, making the moon shift uncomfortably. Hak was also dressed in different clothes, more along the lines of what he had worn during their short time in Fuuga previously, but with an extra hint of formality.

Yun, however, was acting nervous. “Yun, the Wind is the one Tribe I know is on my side. They will not betray us, so just calm down and enjoy food you didn’t have to make, alright?” She assured him, taking a seat between him and Hak.

“I’m more impressed with actually meeting the great war hero Mundok.” He admitted with a blush.

This drew a laugh from Mundok. “Boy, the war heroes are the ones who fell on the battlefield, not the ones who become old and grey and die in their beds.”

“Like hell you’ll die in your bed, for all that you’re old and grey.” Hak muttered into his rice bowl, ignoring Mundok’s glare and Kija’s scandalized look.

Tae-yeon eagerly took up entertaining the others as Yona, Hak, and Mundok went to the Elder’s study to hash out the details, the few there were to hash out. “I’m not going to have to become King, right?” Hak asked.

“The question of your official title can be left for when the time comes. We’re years away from formulating a marriage contract, so we have time to argue over it.” Yona assured him. “I would prefer not to seal a marriage contract until we can safely return to Hiryuu Castle.”

“Are you seriously complaining about being crowned King?” Mundok questioned. “You’re too useful to just lay around and sire Yona-hime’s children.”

“It’s not my throne to claim Gramps. It’s hers; her kingdom and her legacy from thousands of years ago. There’s nothing really stopping her title from being ‘King of Kouka’ beyond custom.” Hak countered. “She’ll have enough trouble asserting her authority without adding me being crowned King.”

“Like I said, we have time to argue over titles in the future. Dowry…I hardly have anything to claim to own, let alone of value.” Yona managed to avoid touching where the hairpin was tucked into her sash.

“Dowry is normally settled in the marriage contract. This can be called a Contract of Betrothal with Intent to Marry. Your parents drew up something similar for their betrothal, because while they were drawn to each other from the start, when they met at Yuohon-sama’s betrothal to her sister, it was several years before they married. This is more binding than a normal betrothal, but it is also more flexible as it allows for some terms to be decided later, like titles and distribution of property.”
Mundok explained.

Hak looked over Yona’s shoulder as she reviewed what had been decided for the contract.

- sole consort and spouse

-any children produced in the union will be of the Sky Tribe, those after the first born shall be permitted to declare themselves for the Wind Tribe upon coming of age

- further details to be decided upon for the formal marriage contract

“I can’t think of anything else that isn’t dependent on returning to the castle.” She admitted.

“It will be several hours before we will have anything to sign.” Mundok said as Yona and Hak stood to rejoin the others. “So try not to burn down the manor in the meantime.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“A crimson dragon struck down Kum-ji.” Kei-shuk read from the witness report, blatantly unimpressed. “How drunk was this person?”

“Except they all say that. Perhaps they are trying to protect the identity of whomever did strike him down?” Su-won proposed. “They couldn’t all have been drunk, since there have been two batches of reports.”

“Who is this ‘Yan-Kim Gi-Gan’?” Ju-do asked. “Her name keeps turning up…mostly with the pirates.”

“I believe she had been a concubine to Yan Kum-ji’s father. She used what he had left her to start up a merchant shipping crew.” Su-won replied, looking over his notes. “One of her crew and her intended successor as captain became mutually interested in Kum-ji’s daughter. Once the relationship was brought to Kum-ji’s attention, he had the man killed and sold his daughter to the Kai Empire. His first foray into human trafficking, although he had been involved in the drug trade for over a decade at that point.”

“How did I miss this? And why were there no complaints?! Protests?! Anything?!?” Guen-tae, summoned to the castle to discuss the happenings in Awa, demanded.

“All the expected taxes were being met, and so there was nothing to indicate you should have looked deeper. As for the lack of complaints and protests…” Kei-shuk handed over a paper, listing all the subordinate officials. “Most had a stake in the business, either to support a drug habit or were in it for the bribes. The meager few honest officials who could have complained were threatened into silence. At least two of them lost a daughter to Kum-ji’s human trafficking, as an example of what would happen if they drew attention to his illegal dealings.”

Flipping the paper over, Guen-tae saw a dense list of names. “Who are these?”

“Known victims. Those with a dot were sold, those with a triangle were murdered, the squares are for ‘suspicious death’.” Ju-do, explained, giving in to the urge to rub his brow.

“Where do we go from here?” Guen-tae asked quietly.

“Anyone who had been a pirate or aided them will receive blanket amnesty for the period of Kum-ji’s lordship over Awa. There’s no indication they attacked ships that were not associated with Kum-ji’s operation, and the pirates never flat out killed anyone. There’s a couple of people who died from infections after encountering the pirates, but the wounds they suffered were not in themselves fatal. But whomever takes over will have to be willing to work with Yan-Kim Gi-Gan.” Su-won answered. “We may have to appoint a junior official, as I doubt those eligible to take over a town like Awa would be flexible enough to work with her.”

“And the people who were sold?”

“There’s at least a third round of records coming, which will have details regarding the actual sales. We will find them, all of them, and we will either take them back or take back knowledge of their fates.” Su-won vowed.
The meeting ended as Guen-Tae went with Kei-shuk to review potential replacements to Kum-ji. “He’s furious enough I’d expect him to go to Awa himself to make sure history doesn’t repeat itself.” Su-won commented to Ju-do.

“Was Yona-hime in Awa?” Ju-do asked, his finger resting, not incidentally, on a line mentioning a crimson-haired girl in the batch freed with Kum-ji’s death.

“You know better than to ask me that.” Su-won said quietly.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, should she in fact live, with what she knows.” Ju-do continued. “If Hak is still at her side, the whole of Wind is with her.”

“One Tribe is not much help. Neither of them are idiots, or foolhardy. All of this—“ He gestured to the stack of scrolls. “—is from her rooms, from her informant, and these—“ Resting a hand on the stack of books “—are her notes.”

Ju-do, not believing Su-won, grabbed one of the books.

It happened to be the one where she had written her notes and ideas about Awa. “…she knew more than us.” He finally admitted. “Whomever her source was, they were very through. She never seemed to have a thought in her head about the kingdom, and her father never made it a point to educate her.”

“You didn’t see her that night. How she looked, as she demanded answers and dared me to kill her myself…if it wasn’t a fluke, she’ll rule far better than her father ever could.” Her face, set with ancient eyes, as it was in Awa, floated in his mind’s eye. “Once I have accomplished what is yet to be done…I will gladly bare my neck and accept her decree.”

Ju-do couldn’t help looking alarmed. “Su-won-sama‒!”

“The plan was always to pass the throne to her eventually. Only now it will likely be sooner than we anticipated, and at the point of a sword.” Su-won cut off Ju-do’s protest. “You know she will not permit me to quietly abdicate to her. She will bring it all to light. All we can do is restore the kingdom as much as we can, and hopefully achieve our goals before she’s gathered the support she needs.”

“So why didn’t Ik-su come with you?” Yona asked Yun, sitting on the veranda of the courtyard with tea and sweets.

Kija and Shin-ah were being showed Fuuga by an eager Tae-yeon. Jaeha had disappeared, likely to harass the guards, Zeno was napping under the tree Hak himself was napping in.

“He said he couldn’t bless a union of dragons any more than the blessing generated from the act itself. Something along those lines.” Yun replied. “Something IS different about Raijuu, isn’t there?”

“He’s properly a dragon’s mate now. Him-me didn’t learn anything about them before he descended, so I don’t know much. But Hak now has a fire inside of him too. Kija calling him ‘Ankoukuryuu’ is far more true than he’s realized.” She explained. “Just what effects the dark fire has on Hak is something we’ll discover as he gets used to it.”

“I’m still gonna call him ‘Raijuu’.” Yun declared.

When he was finally able to collapse on his bed, after witnessing the executions of the seventy three
men who attacked their comrades for Zheng, and being fussed over by Yun-an, who bandaged his
cuts and evened up his hair, he was asleep the instant his head hit the pillow. Guen, having trailed
behind him into his bedroom since he had been swaying, got him under the covers, despite the sheen
of sweat he could see building on his brow.

He was with his dragon self, who was singed from fighting to re-contain their fire. “How bad was
it?” He asked, eyeing where the singed scales looked closer to being flat out burnt.

“A human body and soul are not meant for it. By forming this body as that of an average human…it
cuts into our lifespan, when it runs free. When you are angry, I am angry as well, and it becomes too
much.”

“How much time have we lost?” He asked concerned.

“You had the potential to reach eighty before tonight. Now, you could reach seventy. That is if it
does not run free again. Most would have the sense to not anger a dragon, but just how many
believe the truth of us, and have the sense to not attack what is ours…”

A knock on the door drew Su-won from the tale Yona had written. “This just arrived by express
messenger from Fuuga.” The guard informed him, handing over a wrapped package. “The
messenger seems a little…unsteady.”

“Probably a marriage or betrothal notice. The Tribe’s tradition practically demands everyone old
enough to get drunk in celebration.” Su-won said as he accepted the package.

“The Wind Tribe does know how to party.” The guard agreed with a laugh, bowing before returning
to his post.

Unwrapping the package revealed a smallish scroll, in the red and golden wrapping of a betrothal or
marriage contract. Curious as to who it pertained to, and why it warranted an express messenger, Su-
won unrolled it.

Contract of Betrothal with Intent to Marry

Between

Son Hak, legal heir of Son Mundok, Elder of the Wind Tribe and former Wind General

And

Yona, Crown Princess of Kouka, legitimate daughter of Il and Cheonsa, King and Queen of Kouka
(both deceased) and heir to Su-won, King of Kouka

With both being of legal age, and having agreed to a union of marriage at such time circumstances
permit the alliance to go forward, they have consented to the following:

- each will be the sole consort and spouse of the other

- all children produced in the union will be of the Sky Tribe

- any children after the firstborn may declare themselves of the Wind Tribe upon attaining legal age

Further details, relating to dowry and titles, will be decided upon in the formal marriage contract.

Below were the signatures and seals of Hak, Yona, and Mundok, both as the head of the Son family
and as the Elder of the Wind Tribe.

Su-won’s throat felt oddly tight. For as blind as he had been to Yona’s feelings for him, he hadn’t missed the feelings between Hak and Yona, for all they tried hiding it. That’s why he had believed her when she lied about Hak being her betrothed. Sometimes, when Yona thought no one was watching, her eyes were filled with such love towards Hak that he would never believe she ever had feelings for anyone else.

With deliberate action, he added his own signature and seal, as head of the Sky Tribe and as King of Kouka.

Outright stating herself as his heir was a bold yet calculated move. With her official status listed as ‘missing’, he couldn’t really name another to replace her, especially since she was his sole surviving royal relative, in addition to there not having been nearly enough time to declare her dead. He did not doubt her return to the castle would involve a reveal of the truth, both of her father’s death and her own escape, as he had told Ju-do.

Stashing the contract carefully away until morning, when it could be officially filed in the Archives, he retired to bed. He swallowed hard, trying to banish the lump in his throat. Resting his arm over his eyes, he started when he felt wetness.

“You gave all of that up, Su-won. Him, her, a future where—“ He cut himself off.

Hiding under his quilt, he eventually drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

He could see Yona, somewhat older, her hair regrown out to its previous length, reviewing documents in the King’s Office, a towel on her shoulder and a bundle at her chest.

Shifting revealed the bundle to be a baby with dark auburn hair at her breast. Evidently finished, she lifted the baby to the towel covered shoulder to burp it. He found himself blushing and averting his eyes as she did not bother tucking herself back in.

“MAMA!” A boy of about six, a twin to Hak at that age with Yona’s eyes, and a girl of about four the splitting image of her mother, ran in.

Yona beamed at her children, pressing a finger to her lips. “Shh…your little sister is going to sleep after finishing her meal.” She whispered.

“You know they don’t go much quieter. I blame Zeno.” Hak walked in behind them, in robes a degree finer to what he normally worn at the castle.

“When can she do anything but eating and sleeping?” The boy whined quietly.

“You forgot crying and making bad smells!” The girl reminded him.

“It will be several months before she’ll stay awake more. Everything is new, and it gets overwhelming. Both of you were like that when you were babies.” She told them with a smile.

“C’mon, go and bug Shin-ah or Droopy Eyes. Wait, not Droopy Eyes.” Hak told them.

“Why not Uncle Jaeha? He said he would take us flying!” The girl complained.

“Cheonsa, we weren’t supposed to mention that!” The boy scolded her, pushing her out of the room before Hak could erupt.
“...I’m gonna pound his head in.” Hak vowed with a clenched fist.

“You know Jaeha would sooner drop me than them.” Yona gently pointed out, grabbing his sleeve.

He leaned down, and kissed her deeply. He wanted to look away, but he couldn’t help admiring the picture they made as they kissed. Hak’s hand came up to caress her bared breast, and she couldn’t quite contain her flinch as he brushed her nipple. “Right, two hour rule.” Hak muttered when he pulled back for air.

The scene shifted to the garden, Yona and Hak on the old stone bench, both with their hands on her swollen belly. Some distance away, the boy and girl from before, now a little older, were coaxing the baby with dark auburn hair away from a blond man. The now toddler girl just furiously shook her head and clung to him tighter.

“So boy or girl?” Hak said, making Yona, who had been dozing, jolt.

“It might be both. It’s too early for Yun to say for sure, but I’m getting bigger faster than the last three times.” She replied.

“Why am I seeing this?” He asked himself.

‘It’s your punishment, as decided by yourself.’

Turning, there was a man of Hak’s height behind him. ‘You know Death would be too kind a fate for all the pain that has happened and still to come. So you are glimpsing the future you have forsaken any role in.’

The man had hair the same brilliant crimson as Yona. “Who are you?” He asked.

The crimson-haired man smiled, like an indulgent parent. ‘You know who I am, just as you know who Yona had been. Your conscious mind just cannot accept what your heart and soul already knows.’

“Hak will not let me live. Even if she does not wish for my death, he will.”

Su-won woke up with the moon high in the sky. “They’ve moved on.” He reminded himself, remembering the first condition of the contract.

Sole consort and spouse of the other.

Hauling himself out of bed, he went to dunk his head in the water basin.

Su-won could not place how he came to be in this position. Yona, Hak, and himself, in a well-appointed bed chamber, all in night robes.

Although for Yona, ‘in’ barely applied, with the sash missing and the robe barely covering the swell of her breasts.

Hak was plastered against his back, and his face flushed at the pulsing hotness in the cleft of his behind. “Solo consort and spouse does not exclude lovers. As long as we both agree.” Hak’s tongue darted out and tasted his pulse point, and an embarrassing loud moan escaped before he bit his lip.

Yona, who had been lying on the bed, sat up. Giving Hak a quick peck on the lips, she grabbed his face and brought her mouth to his.
She was well practiced with Hak, and Su-won had his mouth open to let their tongues touch and caress each other before he realized he was doing it.

It was then he realized that Hak had his arms pinned to his body, meaning he couldn’t reach out and touch. He found himself whining as she pulled away. “There’s just the three of us here; you can be as loud as you want.” She told him, running a hand down his front, pulling his sash off.

He could only squirm in Hak’s iron grip as her hand continued exploring his chest. Her fingers had calluses from archery practice, and they felt better than he’d admit out loud when she started playing with his nipples.

Hak leaned forward to kiss her, and Su-won had an up close view, where he could every minute change in their faces as their mouths moved against each other and their tongues danced. He wanted to look away, embarrassed to be witnessing something that seemed so private, but he found his eyes glued to the scene.

Ending the kiss, Hak claimed Su-won’s own mouth as Yona leaned down to examine his nipples with her tongue. They were more sensitive than he had ever imagined, and he found himself grinding back against Hak’s hardness as his hips thrust forward.

Then Yona pulled back. With Hak’s mouth hovering near his ear, Su-won just watched with wide eyes and flushed face as Yona slowly slid the night robe off her shoulders and down her arms.

The drawings Ju-do had shown him when he hit puberty paled next to her naked glory. His eyes couldn’t decide where to rest, taking in the rounded breasts that bore ‘love bites’ (Su-won thought that was the right term) and going down her stomach to her mound, with her hair there as vibrant a crimson as the hair on her head.

It seemed wet. “She likes having someone at her mercy as much as she likes being at the mercy of someone. Even if she won’t let me see if I can make her come just from attention to her breasts.” Hak said into his ears, the hungry tone in his voice making Su-won shiver.

Yona rolled her eyes. “Ignore him.” His arms were free now, and she reclined back on her arms, spreading her legs enough to reveal her folds, glistening wet.

Hak’s hand guided his as he began exploring them, a nub at the top generating the most reaction.

Then he was laying on top of her, Hak’s hardness grinding his behind and making him grind and thrust forward, bringing his own hardness against her wet folds.

An impossibly loud crack of thunder rudely jolted Su-won from his highly unusual, yet highly pleasant dream. Bringing a hand to his hardness, it took no time at all before the world whited out.

Taking in the sky lightening despite the thunder storm, and feeling more tired than when he went to bed, Su-won slapped a palm over his face, uttering a highly out of character word as he thought of what he had to do and remembering the dreams.

“FUCK.”

Chapter End Notes
…I’m not even sorry…
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Yun and Kija were tied as to who was more surprised at the massive, city wide party that accompanied the contract signing. Even the messenger was tipsy as he took off for Hiryuu Castle. Kija was waylaid by several girls who were making implications that completely flew over his head, much to Jaeha’s and Hak’s delight.

Yun was just baffled at how willingly Yona joined in the drinking. “Yun, I’ve been having ever increasing larger cups of wine since I was eight. As this is a celebration of an alliance as much as for a betrothal, it would be rude to not to take part.” She assured him.

Yun found himself off to the side with Tae-yeon and the other kids barred from drinking, watching the chaos. “Everyone will be grumpy tomorrow. I don’t get why they keep doing it; when I ask they just say ‘tradition’ and say I’ll get it when I’m older.” Tae-yeon complained, working his way through a large plate of sweets. “But I get to eat as many sweets as I want! So it’s not all bad.”

Sighing, Yun watched Shin-ah have a silent conversation with a girl about his age, while Zeno was surprisingly matching Jaeha shot for shot. “Zeno’s body is sturdy!” He cheered, when Jaeha asked how he was keeping pace.

“Doesn’t mean you’ll not get drunk.” Jaeha retorted, a little off balance but managing to not slur his words.

Hak finally broke free from where Mundok, Tae-u, and Han-dae were gathered with several others, making increasingly lewd suggestions punctuated by random bursts of bawdy song, to reclaim Yona, who was receiving oodles of unnecessary advice from the laundress and a few other matrons. “Remember it’s rude to spit!” They called after the pair, as Hak took the easy route and swept Yona up in his arms, amidst her giggles.

“Do I want to know what they were suggesting?” He asked drily, struggling not to join in her giggles.

“Nope! No more than what I want to know the suggestions you were getting!” She chimed. “Besides, Mistress Sayuri’s book was very thorough.”

Somehow Hak kept a hold of her as his mind went Places. It was a near thing, not dropping her outside his door when she decided to start groping him. “Door open now, grope inside.” He growled.

“Watch the step!” She giggled as she clung on.

“That’s your problem.” He reminded her as he set her down on the futon as he kneeled. “Gramps can’t complain about ‘defiling’ anymore.” He pulled the knot of the sash cord loose.

“Why do they call it ‘defiling’ anyway? If it was rape I might get it, but I’m an eager participant.” She questioned, pushing his robes aside to touch bare skin.

“Hell if I know. Probably cuz you’re supposed to be married when you do it, if you’re a girl, which is crazy.” Stymied by the over dress, he pulled back, letting her finish removing her clothes herself as he took care of his.
Getting naked first, he couldn’t wait for her to remove her shift, pinning her to the mattress as he kissed her deeply and slid a hand inside to cup a breast.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, her wet folds rubbed against his dick. “I wish you could be inside me. But we can’t chance it, since we won’t stay lucky forever.” She whispered against his mouth when they had to break for air.

“I might not be able to put my cock inside of you, but there’s other things I can fill you with.” He reminded her, both of their flames flaring bright as he ran his nails against the underside of her breast, making her toss her head back and bare her throat.

His teeth found the spot that always drove her crazy as his hands cupped a breast in each, rubbing a thumb over the nipple. She could only hold on, pressing against his dick and digging her nails into his arms.

Hak returned to her mouth to swallow her moans as his hands shoved the shift off her torso, framing bare skin with white cotton. Pausing to place a kiss on each nipple, he lifted a leg up and to the side to give him the most access to her wet, swollen folds and nub.

Somehow Yona had the presence of mind to bite down on her hand when his tongue set to work, chasing every bit of wetness before diving into the source. His heated gaze sent fire up to her eyes, and she was reminded of how he had licked the honey off her arms in Awa. Her knee rested on his shoulder, and she dug her heel into his back when he decided to taste her nub, before sucking on it, a sweet only he could ever taste.

Her peak snuck up on her, and seemed to last forever as he continued sucking her nub through it, until she squirmed away, the sensation passing from pleasure to overwhelming. She could only pant, limp on the mattress as she watched him wipe her wetness from around his mouth and chin, and then lick it off his hand.

Closing her eyes, she could see their fire, crimson and dark, coursing through both of them. It was an infinite loop, and she could see how they fed each other. Tasting herself as he leaned down to kiss her, he let her roll them over.

Pulling back, she felt his dick, pulsing fire hot in the cleft of her ass, and as much as she wanted to line him up and let herself take that fire in again, she knew she couldn’t. The timing was all wrong, and she didn’t want to feel the spark of new life inside of herself go out, simply because it wasn’t safe enough to nurture it into fire.

With deliberate action, she slid down his body, making sure to let his dick slide through her cleavage, making him gulp hard.

It was an idea, but for another time.

As embarrassing as it had been, the tidbits of the matrons, how they had described going about taking all of his dick in her mouth sounded promising, since the book she had been given had been a bit hazy on how to pull that off.

Taking a deep breath, she took the head in her mouth, letting her tongue wrap around it. The strangled groan as she swallowed around it sent a thrill down her spine. She inched her way down his dick until it became harder to breathe, and pulled back, the tip of her tongue teasing the slit.

Hak was wondering if he’d rip holes in the mattress as she repeated the process, getting a little farther each time. It felt like he hit something, so he risked a look down.
The instant the image processed that yes, his whole cock was inside her mouth and (likely) down her throat, he came hard, nearly as hard as the first time he had come inside of her. “Fuck.” He exhaled, running a hand through his bangs as she crawled up to lay on top of him.

He noticed her rubbing her throat. “You alright?”

“I don’t think I’ll be doing that very often. Just…feels too weird.” Yona admitted with a grimace.

“I didn’t expect it period, so whenever you want to surprise me is fine with me.” He admitted with a perverted smirk.

“…we need to change the bedding.” She said, eyeing the evidence of their activities. “Especially if Tae-yeon comes in again.”

Getting up to do just that, he paused with the bedding closet half-way open. “He had been her brother.” He stated.

“Yeon. And before that, likely Guen’s first younger sister An. She had had a similar problem as Tae-yeon, but in that time…she was four, the winter she died.” She elaborated quietly, folding their clothes.

“Yeon…” Fresh bedding in his arms, he walked over and handed them to her, before turning to get out a couple of night robes. “I dreamed of their first visit to…here, I guess. He couldn’t get to sleep without her?”

She smiled to herself as she laid out the fresh bedding. “Yeah…for some reason, having her near him let him sleep better. Even though it was several months before…they had still shared a bed.”

Finished, she stood to find him behind her, a night robe ready in his hands. “She hadn’t thought much of herself, since she was so much the opposite of what a woman was supposed to be.” He said, remembering Hiryuu’s words to Ha-kun about flawed jade, when she had questioned whether or not he truly thought her pretty.

“Yeon was her first brother to be born alive, his mother dying to bring him into the world. She was sixteen, had already been trained to inherit, and he had been ill frequently as a baby.” Fiddling with her now tied sash, she asked. “Does it bother you, to be remembering more?”

Hak hugged her from behind, tucking her head under his chin. “It would be less frustrating if I could remember things in order. But it’s not—dreaming of that time…I’m getting a glimpse of how she had been so important to him, enough to make a binding vow.”

Yona shifted enough to crane her head back to look at his face. “She had fascinated him from the start, at the meeting to discuss bringing her lands into Kouka. It grew as she stepped out to face him in combat. Fascination bred respect, and awe, and then…”

“Love.”

Nodding slightly, she raised up enough to brush her lips against his. It deepened as he kissed back, their fire basking in each other and ancient/new love.

Reluctantly letting it end, they curled up in the fresh bedding. “I don’t want to remember what the bleeding feels like. Or pregnancy.” He told her in all seriousness, and she hid a smile.

They fell quiet, and she was on the verge of sleep when he asked a final question. “What were they named?”
She didn’t need to ask which ‘they’ he meant. “The boy was named Yak-shi, after her father. The girl…was named Yona, for the elder sister who died in the months before he descended.” She murmured.

“Oi, how are you still straight up?” Jaeha slurred, sprawled on Zeno’s back as he dragged him out of the carnage of the party. Shin-ah, who hadn’t drank much, carried a passed-out drunk Kija, while Yun trailed behind with a scowl.

“Zeno’s body is sturdy! So don’t have him taste for poison, cuz it won’t hurt him.” He chimed quietly.

“Did you have a drinking contest with Jaeha knowing full well you wouldn’t get drunk?” Yun questioned.

“Cheater.” Was what Jaeha tried to say, but it came out “He-ter”.

Rolling his eyes, Yun pushed ahead to open the door to the room Zeno had picked, right next to the one where all but Yun could feel Yona’s torch, banked for the night with the dark flame of her consort next to her.

Kija stirred as Yun quickly prepared two futons for the drunks. Having noticed how the dragons gravitated to Yona in their sleep, he set them up against the wall. Shin-ah settled Kija down carefully while Zeno just let Jaeha slide off his back and hit the bed face first.

Being drunk, Jaeha giggled and latched onto Kija, palming his ass. Shin-ah took in the sight with a tilted head, Ao herself sleeping off the alcohol she had gotten a hold of. “Why drink if you can’t get drunk? I doubt it’s for the taste.” Yun asked, setting up his own futon and leaving Shin-ah and Zeno to take care of themselves.

“As long as the other person is buying, easy bet.” Zeno explained. “The trick is to get out before they wake up and get mad and say Zeno cheated.” As usual, he latched onto Shin-ah’s fluff once both were laying down.

“Wouldn’t it be, though? Not exactly an honorable way to use your powers…” Yun trailed off.

“Honor is for the dead and the King. Not for the living who will protect the King…no matter the cost.” Zeno retorted quietly, burying his face in Shin-ah’s fluff to avoid Yun’s questioning glaze.

Yona opened her eyes to find herself in him-her’s arms, flying through the sky on top of dragon-them. “It’s been a while, since the last time we were here.” She commented.

“It has.” His chin rested on top of her head.

“…I don’t feel you, either of you, as much as before Zeno joined.” She admitted.

“You don’t need us hovering behind your eyes. You never did.” Dragon-them spoke up. “The fire is yours now. You have your dragons and your mate.”

“That doesn’t mean the two of you don’t deserve to watch through me. Just because I know who Yona is now…I do want you to stay.”

“He’s too busy getting busy with Ha-kun.” Dragon-them revealed, making him-her smack the scales. “Like you haven’t been equally busy getting busy with Ankoukuryuu!”
She giggled, before sobering, remembering what she wanted to know. “I know I was born now because Father and Mother had finally met and married again, but it was also because of growing darkness, wasn’t it?”

Him-her sighed deeply. “Yes. The priests and oracles being expelled was just a sign of it.”

She had a feeling it related to Uncle Yuhon, but she wanted to ask her spirits and Zeno first. “You really should have learned more about dragon’s mates. I have no clue what to expect.”

“We didn’t prepare as much as we should have, in the ways we should have.” Dragon-them conceded sheepishly.

“It’s strange…I can picture being with Jaeha or Kija or Shin-ah sexually, but no intercourse. Kissing and touching to mutual climax, but not actually having sex with them. And Su-won…only if Hak’s there, even though I know that chance died with Father.” She explained bluntly, for what use was it to be discreet with yourself?

“We have learned some things since you were born, especially once it was clear you and Hak would finish what Ha-kun and I inadvertently started.” Him-her began. “Fidelity works differently. It doesn’t preclude sexual pleasure with others, but sexual intercourse will only occur if both mates are in agreement and taking part.”

“It doesn’t bother me, but I know how much it would bother Hak. Even more so since if it was what I wanted, he would never stop me.” She remarked, tracing the dragon embroidered on her skirt.

“Could you really see Hak agreeing to have sex with Kija? Or Jaeha? He might agree to Shin-ah, if only because it would symbolize a huge step in coming out of his shell. Too much has happened and still to come for Hak to let Su-won come within fifty feet of you. I can’t say if it is completely outside the realm of possibility…” Him-her shrugged.

“Is Kaya being Zeno’s mate why I can’t picture being with him? At first, I thought it was just the lingering guilt, but it feels entirely wrong to even discuss sex with him.” She asked.

“Do you remember how he was, when they met? Without her, he would have let himself stay there, where he’d fallen, to be covered up by the passage of time, too tired with life to even try.” Him-her whispered.

“Yellow Brother had not been inside of him long enough to do anything other than try and shield his mind, so he wouldn’t have gone completely mad, all the while cursing his folly.” Dragon-them said mournfully.

“Then she found him. Her, knowing each day could be her last, and that no one would know when she died or mourn her death…yet staying bright throughout it all, staying kind…He found a will to do what he had always done before, to smile and help people, to enjoy the small moments. How could we ever intrude on that? When it was because of us that he ever suffered such a fate?” Him-her continued, tears wetting her hair as she blinked against her own tears.

Moments later, when the tears stopped, she pointed out the obvious. “That doesn’t explain why Zeno and sex doesn’t compute in my head.”

“Look at him! Does he seem like he could know anything about that?!” Dragon-them pointed out.

“He has a point.” Him-her conceded.

“I think it’s the cheerfulness.” She agreed.
It was the pre-dawn hours when Yona awoke. Nudging Hak, she sat up as he groaned awake. “?” He questioned with a yawn.

“Guen, Abi, Shuten. Get Zeno and Kaya.” She ordered.

Hardly a minute later Zeno and Kaya had joined the other three, sitting around Yona and Hak’s futon. “Mundok has answered some of my questions, but not what is likely the most important one. Why was Father against Su-won as my husband and his heir?” Her tone brokered no argument. “Tell me.”

The spirits and Zeno entered into a conversation of facial expressions, trying to decide who would be the unlucky bastard to tell him. With a sigh, Abi conceded, as he was the one to overhear it to start with, and finally spoke. “During the war with Xing, there had been an incident involving Yuhon, a unit under his direct command, and Xing prisoners. He…he ordered them beheaded, and the heads deposited at the gates of Xing’s capital. To get Xing to the treaty table, Ju-nam vowed in the name of Hiryuu that Yuhon, his children, and his grandchildren would not inherit the throne.”

Yona paled to such a degree that everyone was concerned that she’d faint. “…it was him. That’s why he terrified me, why I could only picture him about to kill me with malice…but I thought his soul would have been charred to ashes with his body…” She whispered, sagging into Hak’s arms.

“So that’s why Xing leave pigs heads at the border crossing every year.” Hak said as the realization dawned. “How was this kept secret?”

“Vows and threats of death to their families. How many people were involved I don’t know, nor do I know just what the consequence for breaking that promise is. It’s not in the actual treaty, I know that much. I overheard it one night when I was returning from looking in the library for books for you.” Abi explained.

“So we could very well expect war with Xing at some point in the near future.” Yona stated. “Like we don’t have enough problems to deal with in Kouka…”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I have no clue how long this will be. So I’m not going to state a number and then go over it like ten times. I’m looking at you Angel.
Shin-ah found himself the first one awake the next morning. Or at least, the first to wake up and stay up, as Zeno was no longer clinging to his fluff but to Jaeha.

Shin-ah was reasonably sure this was simply for the reaction, as Zeno had gone to the trouble of making it look as if the three of them had passed out after sexual activities of some kind. Ao was passed out on her back on top of Yun, who looked a lot younger than he did while awake.

The fires of Yona and Hak were dimmed in sleep. They looked like one flame, with as close as they held each other.

Quietly getting out of bed, he caught sight of the girl he had spent the party with. She hadn’t spoken, but mouthed her name: Ayumi.

Looking through the scarf she wore around her neck, he could see the scars on her throat, and how her vocal cords hadn’t healed correctly, making it painful for her to talk.

Taking advantage of his quiet nature, his ancestor had begun sharing the vast knowledge he had of the body, how to spot poison and infection and diseases, how to pick out tiny pieces of bone fragments from around a break, and how to see which nerves caused the greatest pain. “I had relied too much on the paralysis ability of the eyes. They are capable of such much more than that, beyond just seeing far. If you know what to hit, you know how to do much damage for little effort. And how to heal someone.” Abi had explained.

Finished dressing, he slipped out of the room. Ayumi was gathering water from the river, so he headed to her.

He didn’t speak when he reached her, just taking the buckets from her. She smiled in greeting, and he could feel his face grow warm. He trailed behind her as she headed back to the place he was staying with the others. Sometimes it was a little overwhelming, the sheer chaos the others generated without trying, for all that Yona tried to carve out some quiet time with him.

A high-pitched scream that he recognized as coming from Kija echoed through the courtyard once they returned. He just sighed, feeling his face grow hotter at Ayumi’s quiet giggle.

Yona had a hard time keeping a straight face as she faced an unrepentant Zeno, with a flustered Kija in one corner, and a rather put-out Jaeha in another. Yun, being rudely awakened, just stormed out as she and Hak ran in. “Zeno…” She said with a sigh.

“Zeno didn’t think Hakuryuu and Ryokuryuu would react as they did!” He protested.


“Really White Snake, you’re always going on about the sacred brotherhood of dragons, what’s so wrong with what happened?” Hak asked, somehow managing to not burst out into evil cackles.

“I’m rather put out about what didn’t happen.” Jaeha grumbled. “How rude to imply something and not follow through with it. Or were you worried about a poor performance?”
Yona had to bite the inside of her mouth as mischief sparked in Zeno’s eyes. “Zeno didn’t want to make Ryokuryuu too tired in his old age. He’s no use to the miss if his heart gives out.”

Hak gave up trying not to laugh as Jaeha froze halfway through standing up, falling back down. Kija’s lips twitched as he tried to keep from reacting to Jaeha’s expression. “But we’re representing the Dragon Warriors and Hime-sama! Such acts are—“

“If you’re worried about appearances, you shouldn’t have drunk so much yesterday.” Hak managed to point out through his laughter. “Not like anyone cares about all of that here.”

Kija tried sputtering protests, but Yona lost her fight to not laugh. “At long as you’re not fighting each other.” She managed, the wolf indignant while the cat was still frozen in place.

Abi, the headman of the village of Seiryuu, quietly marveled at Hakuryuu Village in the early morning hours. His decision to relocate to Hakuryuu Village was not an easy one, nor one met with great enthusiasm, but it felt like the right thing to do.

Even more so in the light of the royal seals on the letter of introduction born by the emissaries from Hakuryuu Village. He had issued an ultimatum; either go to Hakuryuu Village or stay in the tunnels. Everyone chose to leave the tunnels.

“Did you sleep well, Headman Abi?” Turning, he saw the Elder of Hakuryuu Village, who was addressed by everyone as ‘Baa-Baa’.

“Ah, yes. Thank you for permitting us refuge in your village.” He thanked her with a bow, only to be waved off. “It would have been wrong to deny you refuge. We share a heritage, and hopefully by doing this we can prevent a loss of heritage from happening again. If we been aware of how you had lost your heritage, we would have made contact before now.”

“…I cannot claim to know much about this heritage, but why did the villages not keep contact between each other?” He tentatively asked.

She sighed, reaching for the tea that had appeared. “From the records preserved from those days, the initial decision to scatter was after the first Seiryuu had been attacked and kidnapped by those after the Dragon’s Eyes. He was successfully rescued, but as to what he experienced…he never shared with the others.”

Baa-Baa eyed the headman of Seiryuu Village. “Who is the current Seiryuu related to? He could not have sprung up from nowhere.”

The tea was nearly finished before he could bring himself to answer. “…my son and heir is the first child of my second wife. My first…she bled out, after bearing the previous Seiryuu. I cannot say…if she would have survived otherwise. As for the current one…my daughter killed herself, after being scorned by both her husband and myself. I do not know if it is a tradition or not, but women who bear Seiryuu usually die soon after, either at their own hands or from childbirth fever. So…the previous one raises the successor.” He explained haltingly.

“…no wonder Yona-hime-sama asked us to reach out to you.” Baa-Baa merely said.

“But what is the Princess doing, traveling the kingdom as she is?” He questioned. “We had heard of the new king’s ascension, but…”

“The new king occupies the throne through regicide.” She told him. “Only an accident of fate let
Yona-hime-sama discover the act in progress, and another accident of fate permitted her escape. She is Hiryuu-ou-sama reborn, and will one day reclaim her throne.”

He wasn’t sure how to response to that, and merely finished his tea in silence. “Hopefully there will not be too much friction between our clans. Not everyone was amiable to coming here, but if this is the way for the clan to atone for the wrongs we have committed against the Seiryuu, then we must follow it.” He said as he stood.

Some of the hot-blooded younger ones would need reminding on that fact. The ones who had been trapped in the cave-in with Yona-hime-sama needed no reminding, as deeply as her anger burned them.

Thankfully, the only person Su-won encountered in the Archives was Ju-do. Kei-shuk was an able advisor, and helpful in the extreme on the logistical side of the coup, but he did not trust him all that much, mostly when it came to Yona. “So one of Mundok’s strays has become engaged?” Ju-do commented. “I heard an express messenger arrived from Fuuga in a tipsy condition.”

“You could put it that way. Truth be told, it is not an engagement that surprises me greatly.” Su-won replied, slotting the scroll in place next to the last royal betrothal contract, between Yona’s parents. “Hopefully the union will be a long and fruitful one.”

Ju-do understood the significance of where he had placed the contract. “Perhaps we should have delayed, although I find myself doubting the truth of what she had revealed to you, in light of this.”

“Her reasoning for what she implied was sound, and this could merely be a smokescreen, to prevent her being summoned back on pretext of a betrothal.” Su-won suggested, although at heart he didn’t believe it. “Undoubtedly she will not remained concealed forever. And we couldn’t have delayed longer, not since she became old enough to be engaged. It would have been harder if there had been a viable alternative to me in the form of her betrothed, given her age.” He reminded Ju-do.

Ju-do reluctantly nodded in agreement as they departed. Purposely, Su-won walked in the opposite direction from Yona’s rooms, as his feet still tended to lead him there if he wasn’t careful.

He found himself in the old family quarter, which had been vacated after Queen Cheonsa’s death. Despite the efforts of the servants, there was still dark marks on the boards where she had dragged herself to Yona’s door.

Staring at the marks, his mind turned to what his uncle had said that night.

//”Your father killed my wife, because she would not permit him to kill my daughter. I killed him and hid the truth to preserve your life along with your mother’s. And now you stand before me to kill me.”

He couldn’t recall seeing Uncle Il so serious. He also had never pictured him acting so composed when facing death. This fact angered him more than if Uncle had attempted excuses or apologies, and he drew his sword and ran it through his heart, forgetting the little declaration he had in mind for this moment. Lightning flashed, highlighting a face completely composed despite the fatal wound.

Turning, he let the body fall off of his sword. It was then that he realized someone had entered the room. The lamp colored Yona’s hair to a shade matching the blood on his sword as she stared, wide-eyed, at her father’s corpse. “CHICHI-UE!” She had screamed, kneeling down to cradle his head in her lap.

Ignoring the strange cry, he took a breath to steady himself before addressing her. “So you’re still
awake…Yona-hime.” Focusing on his anger let him walk out of the shadows hard-faced enough.

She stared at him, shock warring with something else on her face. “Su-won—chichi-ue wa--tasuke o--!”

“King Il is beyond help. Because I killed him.” Not understanding what she was trying to say in this unknown language, he presumed that she was asking him to get help./

That memory led to the one of her escape.

/It was that courtyard now. “How?” Her question paused everyone, including the soldier about to kill her. “How could my death…and my father’s murder…be for the good of Kouka? What could ever…justify the bloodshed?”

There was a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach as Kei-shuk mocked her words. It was as if something old and terrifying was trying to spark to life.

“You’re right; I AM ignorant…of far too much…” He was almost too scared to breathe as her skirts twisted in her hands and she raised her head. “But I am not so naïve…as to listen to anyone attempting to paint revenge in shades of justice. It was not Kouka’s name invoked…to justify Father’s murder…”

Whatever it was sparked to life, filling her eyes with fire.

Actual fire.

Fire that only grew as she demanded answers he could not give. “I will not die an ignorant girl on my knees.” She was every inch her title as she stood tall to face her death.

No; not a princess…she was more like a King, as a faint image of a crimson haired man appeared over her as she dared him to kill her, with an even fainter image of a crimson dragon over both of them.

It was quiet relief when Hak appeared. As much as he didn’t want to fight his old friend, Hak was too loyal to Il to see reason. That relief only grew when they managed to escape./

Why would Uncle claim Father had killed Okisaki-sama when she prevented him from killing Yona? Why would Father try to kill Yona? “If he was telling the truth.” He reminded himself. “But why would he lie about that, when facing death?”

There are rumors of a Secret Archive, known only to the King, filled with untold secrets. Maybe…” I don’t have time to try looking for it now.” Su-won said, noting the position of the sun. “The latest batch from Awa should be arriving soon, not to mention the question of who will replace Kum-ji.”

“Is there anything else you need to ask me before you depart?” Mundok asked the next morning.

Yun had wanted to leave once everyone up yesterday, but Kija and Jaeha weren’t in a fit state to travel.

At least, to travel without complaining.

“I need a sword of my own, and don’t fight me on this Hak. You said you’d teach me after I killed a man with a bow and arrow, which I have done.” She reminded him with a glare. “I already know I don’t have the stamina or strength to fully use a full size one currently.”
Mundok stood, and walked over to a chest behind his desk. Unlocking it, he pulled out two swords of a pattern similar to her dagger, one a standard size sword with a dragon curled around the handle, and one two thirds the size of the other and plain. “When Cheonsa-sama requested that I have the Wind’s best metalsmith make your dagger, she asked that he also make two swords to go with it. The shorter sword should serve your needs until you are able to use the full size one to the fullest.”

He handed the shorter one over with a bow, which she returned as she accepted it.

*I had really hoped I could have waited a little longer before doing this.* Hak reflected as they departed.

“Zeno do you know anything about swords?” Yona asked.

The return trip back to Ik-su took longer, with Yun insisting on a winding route, even though Shin-ah had confirmed there were no Royal or Fire Troops in Wind. Arriving at nightfall, somehow Ik-su managed to bring down half of the roof in the time they were gone, meaning they had to sleep in the storehouse, given the hint of rain in the sky.

Hak and Jaeha had been drafted to fix the roof the next morning. Rather, they didn’t run away fast enough to get out of it.

“Pointy end goes in the other guy?” Was his unhelpful advice.

She scowled at him with crossed arms. “For real, Zeno. I don’t want to have to order Hak to teach me, Jaeha I’ve only seen use throwing knives, Kija fights bare-handed, and Shin-ah ran away after he nicked me. I need to assure him it’s fine, but first I need to know if you can help me, or if I’ll need to trick Hak or try pulling from him-me.”

“Zeno does mean for real. Defense isn’t a high priority for him, not when he can heal from any damage, and what he does know is focused on hitting the vitals quickly and accurately. He can teach you about killing, but not about sword arts.” He explained. “Why don’t you want to order mister to teach you? If you order him he’ll do it.”

“…I won’t always be his master. He’s my Consort; my partner. I…know he will always follow my orders, but I…” She trailed off.

“Just because you will not always be his master doesn’t change how you are his master now.” Zeno reminded her gently. “And even if you no longer regard yourself as his master, he undoubtedly will. It’s the same for the Dragon Warriors. The two notions, master and friend, are not mutually exclusive.”

Her throat tight, she just nodded. “I know, but…it’s real now. I know who Yona is in relation to Hiryuu-ou and Hiryuu-kami, yet…” She shook her head. “I don’t even know what I’m trying to say.”

“The dynamic between the two of you has changed, and you’re still finding your footing.” He proposed.

“That…sounds right…” She conceded, still unsure.

“Go reassure Seiryuu, and leave the issue of learning sword arts until you’re sure of how to approach the question with mister.” Zeno half-suggested, half-ordered. “Until then, see how much of what you can remember from him you can apply to yourself.”
Yona hugged Zeno tightly. “Thank you. No wonder the priests became the force that they did, with you as the founder.”

“Zeno just played at it; he couldn’t really be called a priest when he couldn’t hear the gods anymore.” He demurred.

“What would hearing the multitude of gods prove in the face of bearing the body of an Elder Dragon God? When you speak seriously, people listen. I doubt their political currency would have remained strong without the skills of you and your successors at oration.” She pointed out.

Zeno rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Actually, let Zeno trying talking to Seiryuu. He might listen to him more than the miss.”

“Alright.” She agreed.

Zeno found Shin-ah in a tree close to the cliff overlooking the waterfall. “Seiryuu alright? The miss said she got nicked and you ran away?”

Shin-ah shifted, uncomfortable. “…don’t want to hurt to her.” Even with her torch warming his heart, he was still leery of losing a place in the sun. “Especially don’t want to draw blood.”

“It’s far better to draw a little blood in training then to shed a lot of it in battle.” Zeno pointed out.

“Kaya agrees with Zeno.” The girl who looked about Yona’s age said as she walked up to Zeno. She always seemed to stick close to him, and at night, sometimes Zeno would murmur her name.

“Kaya is Zeno’s wife.” She told him, reading the confused tilt of his head. “She died a long time ago from illness, but Ouryuu-kami was able to let me stay with him without becoming a possessing ghost because of that.”

Zeno’s fingers interlaced with hers as he grabbed her hand, much to Shin-ah’s shock. He had had enough experience with the spirits around Yona to know that while they can touch the living, the living can’t touch them back. “Dragons exist between Earth and Heaven; that’s why you can see spirits and ghosts. Zeno’s closer to a true dragon than the rest of you, so he can touch them.”

The air seemed charged with something, and Shin-ah took it as his cue to exit his tree and give them privacy.

“Seiryuu.” Zeno called after Shin-ah, making him pause. “You can ask whatever you want of Zeno, so don’t be afraid to ask.”

Shin-ah lifted a hand to show he had heard him, then continued back to the house.

“What is Zeno up to?” Kaya asked, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Seiryuu needs prodding out of his shell. So I’m hoping to try to get him to ask his questions out loud, without us guessing.” He answered, hugging her to him. “Like asking to be called by name.”

“Zeno might have to wait a while for that.” She pointed out. “Everyone’s busy elsewhere; Shin-ah knows not to look; and the others will run interference…” She said with a blush, pulling at his scarf.

Zeno grinned broadly, getting the hint. “As my lady wife commands.” He teased, kissing her deeply before she could protest at being called ‘lady wife’.

If someone who could not see spirits had happened across the scene, Zeno would have appeared to
vanish.

Inside Zeno—inside the Yellow Dragon God—Ouryuu-kami was curled around his sleeping mate. With his human half’s mate a spirit, her dragon self could not completely awaken.

But with every act of mating, she stirred a fraction more, and he could see her dream of the mating flight. “I wonder what my past self would think, should he glimpse this? I, who have watched countless beings flicker into and out of existence, choosing to have a part of me become one of them. I may not have planned it…but I’m glad Zeno was too strong to be submerged into me.” He whispered.

His mate shifted a bit, a half-formed mental poke drawing his attention back to her, and the mating dream.

Chapter End Notes

I have established that on occasion Yona speaks old Koukan, especially when the fire runs high and hot or she’s in shock, right? So while her PoV of the scene had her speaking what she thought was modern Kouka, Su-won’s memory of it, and the actual reality of it, has her actually speaking the old Koukan.

Anyone else think the Dragon’s Eyes could potentially do more than what they’ve been displayed doing? We don’t know exactly how much was lost over the centuries, so I’m thinking that Abi at least would have been smart enough to figure out a non-combative way of using them, especially after the kidnapping incident.

‘Okisaki-sama’ means something along the lines of ‘mother of the realm’; it’s how Su-won refers to Yona’s mother in the series.
Su-won finally had time to return to Yona’s journal, having been interrupted by the notice of her betrothal to Hak. “Maybe if I focus on this, my dreams will stop going places they shouldn’t.” He hoped out loud, somehow flushing despite the blood going south as he recalled the theme of the dreams.

For some reason, the idle fantasies he had discarded in his quest to avenge his father and remake Kouka had returned with a vengeance, but with the addition of Yona. It had become impossible to picture Hak in such a way without Yona being present in some fashion.

Shaking his head furiously to (attempt to) shake the images away, he read back over the last paragraph he had finished before continuing.

“You had the potential to reach eighty before tonight. Now, you could reach seventy. That is if it does not run free again. Most would have the sense to not anger a dragon, but just how many believe the truth of us, and have the sense to not attack what is ours…” Dragon-him trailed off, giving the impression of a shrug.

He didn’t know how to respond to that, just gently resting a hand next to a patch of burned scales. “If we do this again, we’ll need to account for the fire.” He noted.

Dragon-him nodded, curling around him as the events of the evening processed and the tears began. “If I was wrong about Zheng, was I wrong about others? Was what he said true? That I…” He couldn’t bring himself to utter the words.

Since descending, he had experienced a whole array of emotions, including ones he had never perceived as a dragon. Affection wasn’t a new one, but the protectiveness it inspired was; probably because he was the youngest Dragon God. There were other dragons that had been born after him, but among the Dragon Gods he was the youngest, and so trying to protect his brothers had never occurred to him. Fear and joy he had been able to readily discern in his observations, and anger was an old friend with how impatient he was.

The intensity of his anger towards Zheng, however, had been startling. Perhaps it had been because he had never been seriously angry, even if he had been banned from Earth for several millennia after his last outburst nearly wiped out humans by accident. “I wanted to kill him.” He admitted, face hidden in scales. “But now that I have, I’m empty.”

“You’re avoiding the real issue.” His dragon self pointed out.

“...he said I was worthless, since I’m a mongrel, whatever that is, implying Mother had betrayed the marriage bed, when that was a concept that never crossed her mind. That because I don’t look like him that I’m not human.” This self-doubt was alien, yet all encompassing. “Do Guen and Yun-an and everyone else really like me, or are they pretending too? Why did looking different make him hate me? He let me trail behind him when he visited, snuck me snacks in the school room, and helped me learn the first few kata. When did the hatred start? How could he have hidden it so well? Did he ever think of me as a friend, or was I just a worthless mongrel?”

Dragon-him said nothing, just thrusting him back into the waking world. Opening his eyes, he saw
Guen curled around him, nearly on top of him, as if to shield him from the world outside. On his other side was Yun-mei, and at some point, he had latched onto her like the stuffed dragon he used to sleep with.

Fine, he still slept with it on occasion, but mostly it sat at the head of his bed.

Alright, he slept with it every night.

Rolling his eyes as he just knew his dragon self was responsible for him admitting that in his head, he found himself smiling. “You could have just told me they were there.” He complained to his dragon-self out loud. Snuggling back in, he drifted back to sleep, his self-doubt eased.

At least two people seemed to genuinely like him.

Su-won had to stop, uncomfortably reminded of the answers Yona had demanded of him That Night. His mind dwelled on it as he mechanically tidied up and prepared for bed.

Only once he was safely under his quilt did he finally give an answer, if only to himself. “It wasn’t a lie, just…not the whole truth…” I’m not sure I ever actually saw her as a little sister; she was just Yona, bright as the blush of dawn. I would have done anything to keep her smiling. “I still would; no matter that now, to keep her smiling means never seeing that smile again.”

Shivering, he huddled down a little farther under his quilt, drifting off into an uneasy sleep.

Abi stepped out of the corner he had been standing in. “If you really wanted to keep her smiling, you should have put her and Hak-sama before revenge.” He told the sleeping form with a frown.

He spied the pair of books under the pillow. “Hmm…he’s only reached the death of Hiryuu-sama’s father.”

If it had been up to all of them, Zeno would have snuck back into Hiryuu Castle to steal the books back, or, failing that, destroyed them. It was a horrible invasion of privacy, as she had never intended what she remembered of her life as Hiryuu-sama to be known.

But she had blatantly and forcefully overruled them. “He’ll never believe the truth if he’s just told it. He will only believe his own work. If there are indications that he’s shared any of it to anyone else, then you may destroy them. Not before. And don’t try lying about it.” She had ordered sternly.

“Miss is scarier than Ou-sama had been.” Zeno had commented after that.

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you’d seen him truly angry.” Guen said. “That first time I saw that, as he confronted his father’s murderer…it was then that I believed he had been Hiryuu-kami. I knew it, before that, but…that was when I really believed it.”

“Now, next question…should I help point out where the King’s Secret Archive is? Well, the most recent one; there’s been as many secret archives as there have dynasties, and not all of them have been found, or all the contents rotted or crumbled away…” Abi pondered to himself, weighing the options. “I’ll see how far he gets on his own first. If he gets on completely the wrong tack, I’ll show him the right direction. He won’t believe the truth of his father’s death otherwise.”

“Shin-ah, can you see Yun?” Yona called up, as Shin-ah looked into the land of Fire.

“…yeah. He’s not that far ahead. He’s almost to a village.” He answered, leaping back down.
“Guess Fire is our next destination.” Hak commented. “How do the fields look?”

“Barren.”

“Lad’s really kind! If he’s bringing food there.” Zeno chirped, reattaching himself to Shin-ah’s fluff. Needless to say, Yun had not succeeded in departing without notice. “How rude of him to go off on his own without telling us!” Kija grumbled.

“Why are the fields barren?” Jaeha asked, having not focused on matters outside Awa.

“Drought. The land can’t recover without careful irrigation and attention, but the Fire General, Kan Su-jin, has instituted a universal conscription, so the only ones left in the villages are women, children, and old men. Royal aid cannot be sent directly to where it’s needed the most, since that would infringe on the rights of the General. But even if royal aid was sent, it’s still up the General to distribute it, and that won’t happen with Kan Su-jin.” Yona explained. “Kan Su-jin had been a childhood friend of Grandfather’s, so that might have something to do with why he’s been able to get away with what he’s been doing, despite how it’s skewed the power balance. And Father had not wanted infighting.”

“Won’t we have to worry about getting caught up in a conscription?” Kija asked, worried.

Zeno snorted. “For every three men conscripted, at least one deserts and becomes a bandit or flees to Earth or Wind. Plus some of the officers doing the conscription will turn a blind eye if one can pay enough. We’ll be fine.”

“How do you know that?” Jaeha asked, suspicious.

“The Miss had me test it…last year?” He answered. “This is one of the areas nominally under Saika’s direct control, so we won’t have to worry about bandits either.”

Yun was not thrilled to discover he’d been followed. “If you’re going to sneak off without telling us, then of course we’ll follow. And you forgot Ik-su can’t lie to save himself.” Hak pointed out flatly.

“Zeno came along with Seiryuu’s fluff!” Somehow Zeno managed the coordination to walk while still clinging to said fluff.

While Hak, Kija, and Jaeha tested out Shin-ah’s fluff for themselves, Yona turned to the task of convincing Yun to let them stay. “If you’re helping out here, then we’ll help too.” She decided.

“No way! In case you haven’t noticed, all of you stand out way too much!” Yun gestured at the grouping of dragons, who were drawing attention from the villagers as much for their unusual appearance as for the general rarity of visitors. “There’s a bunch of sick people here, and it’s not very safe. It’s no place for a princ—someone like you.” He added, barely remembering to avoid saying her station.

“Yun, Kouka is my kingdom, my legacy, and my inheritance.” Yona reminded him quietly. “More importantly, given the state of things, I am King Il’s daughter. That’s all the more reason for me to be here. I need to see the results of Father’s choices. Reports and hearsay differs from reality.”

Yun, realizing there was no way to change her mind, or that of the others, reluctantly conceded. “…fine.”

“This’ll be a hoot and a half.” Shuten commented.
“Why is it so cold? It’s summer!” Yona complained through chattering teeth as she scrubbed dishes.

“You don’t need to stay.” Yun reminded her, bemused.

“I’ll be fine…it’s just cold.” She protested. “Is this where you were born Yun?”

“No. I used to trade with them, but it’s gotten so bad that they don’t have anything left to trade. So I’d bring food and medicine. I was worried about them while I was gone, so…I’m glad they’re doing okay.”

“For someone who says that they hate dealing with people, you’re always looking after everyone, no matter where they are.” She commented.

“To make myself feel better.” He protested. “Poverty is everywhere in Fire. For every person I help, many more starve. Even if I bring a day’s worth of food, that still means no food tomorrow.”

“…sometimes, little actions are all we can take.” She replied quietly. “Every time you bring them food, it’s still one less day where they go to bed hungry. Even if you can’t help everyone, or even most people…as long as you can still help one person, it’s still a victory, however small. And those small victories can add up, until there’s enough to tip the balance.” Yun found himself entranced by her words, and it almost seemed like it was as much Hiryuu-ou saying the words as Yona herself. “Unfortunately, it can’t help change the root of the problem.” She conceded.

Wanting to distract himself from the gloomy turn of mood, Yun went to fletch everyone for lunch.

“I caught a bunch of fish and ate it all; so I’m good.” Hak said in response to the lunch call.

“Not gonna fool him.” Shuten commented as Yun scolded him for not sharing. *Hold it…what river? There’s no rivers near here…* “Kija, lunchtime.” He told Kija as he walked part.

“I had some fish with Hak; I’m full.” Kija declined, a chorus of stomach growls betraying him.

“…I can hear your stomach from here.” Yun said flatly.

“It’s distant thunder--!” Kija’s defense was cut off as Hak beamed him on the head with a small piece of wood. “Teach your stomach to not growl.” He scolded, Jaeha fighting laughter next to him.

“Zeno can teach you! Tighten the muscles around your belly button!” Zeno chimed in, demonstrating.

“Kija, he’s trolling you; don’t listen.” Guen warned, to no avail.

“…it’s not working. And yours is growling too!” Kija pointed out, flushing as Zeno started laughing.

This made Jaeha give up on fighting. “You all are adorable!” He managed to get out through his laughter.

“…idiots. All of you.” Yun complained, Abi nodding unseen in agreement with him. “You’re eating though, right Yona?” He asked.

“No, I’m al—“ Her stomach gave her away. She started laughing, and Yun couldn’t help joining in.

_The idiots Ik-su said would change Kouka are idiots who can laugh even when they’re hungry. If things get even harder, they’ll be sure to face those with a smile too._ Yun reflected.
“Pardon me,” Turning, Yun saw a Fire Tribe official. “Where might I found the village chief?”

“…over there, I think.” Yun pointed over to where he had last seen Se-dol.

“What’s going on?” Hak asked, as he and Jaeha got off the roof they had been repairing.

“It’s an official! With a bunch of troops! You have to hide!” Yun exclaimed, trying to block them off.

“Really? Let’s take a look.” Hak proposed, and Yun knew if he was serious about it, he couldn’t stop him. “No way you weird beasts—!”

“YOU’RE DEFAULTING AGAIN?!” The official roared, and despite himself, Yun joined the others hiding in the bushes to watch the encounter.

“What are the odds this will end up with the official and troops being beaten up?” Kaya asked the others.

“No bet.” Guen replied, eyeing how Kija had enlarged his dragon hand, Yun scolding him in a whisper. “Calm down! You go out like that and they’ll arrest you even if you do nothing!” Yun looked to Yona for help in calming Kija down, but she was no calmer than he was, bow at the ready.

“…this is gonna end up a replay of the Two Traveling Idiots.” Abi deadpanned, much to Guen’s chagrin. “It was the Two Traveling Warriors, not—!”

“No! Yun brought that for us!” Se-dol’s daughter had grabbed the robe of the soldier who had discovered the food Yun had brought. The official decided to use it for the taxes, despite the lack of rice. “We’ll take her too. Her sale should get us the rest of the money owed here.”

“Please excuse her impertinence; she’s only a child—!” Se-dol was violently kicked by one of the soldiers. “If you don’t like it, get us rice and money.” He was reminded as his daughter struggled fruitlessly against the strong grip of the soldier holding her.

Suddenly there was a spray of blood, and the girl was released as the soldier grabbed his shoulder, a throwing knife sticking out. “Who threw that?!”

“Me.” Jaeha walked out, hand raised. “Call me the green dragon that soars through the heavens!” He struck a pose, leaving everyone dumbfounded.

“He’s an idiot! Be careful!” Yun found himself agreeing with them as he turned to the task of trying to rein Jaeha in. “What the hell are you—?!?”

“If they were only taking things, then I wouldn’t have bothered. But do you really expect me to stand quietly by as they abused a girl?” Jaeha informed him. “I was a pirate; smooth relations with government officials will never happen with me.”

“…he’s totally your descendant.” Kaya pointed out to Shuten with a sweatdrop, as things got even stranger.

Hak decided to make an appearance, wearing Shin-ah’s fluff on his head to hide his face, Ao still perched in it.

“Now there’s someone stranger! With a growling stomach!”

“A monster?!?!?”
“No, a hermit?”

“What’s that living on his head?”

Shin-ah hunched in on himself shivering as Hak continued, “You can call me the Dark Dragon.”

“You don’t need to give a name!” Yun protested, Zeno wrapping his scarf around Shin-ah’s neck in an attempt to try and keep him warm.

“It’s not like they can see my face, so it’s fine.” Hak assured Yun, as one soldier eyed his weapon. “Hey! Doesn’t that look famil—!”

Hak casually tossed it away. “Is it a clue to his identity?!”

Abi couldn’t contain his whistle. “It’s landing a quarter mile away. Nice. Looks like his strength’s increased even more.”

“I’m sure the villagers are quite surprised by you monsters, hm?” Kija proposed as he and Shin-ah joined Jaeha and Hak.

“AAAHHH!!! A GOBLIN!!!!” Someone in the mass of troops screamed, much to Kija and Guen’s displeasure. “Can’t they tell what a dragon’s arm looks like?” Guen muttered.

“Yona…” Yun whined. “Tell me you’ll stay hidden…” Do I just have a face no one listens to?

“If we’re going to stand out by existing, then we should just embrace it.” Yona pushing her way to the front of the others. “LISTEN UP YOU SNOT-FACED SCUM! YOU THINK YOU CAN COME AND START TROUBLE ON *OUR* TURF?”

“…this is gonna be worse than the Two Traveling Warriors.” Guen admitted with a sob, Yun unknowingly joining him.

“A girl?”

“Their turf?”

“Are you bandits?” One particularly brave soul demanded.

“THAT’S RIGHT!” Yona declared, leaving most everyone dumbfounded. “That food, that child, everything in this village belongs to us! This is your one and only warning! RUN AWAY WITH YOUR TAILS BETWEEN YOUR LEGS LIKE THE MANGY DOGS YOU ARE!!!”

Guen found himself banging his head against a house, Shuten cackling at him as Hak tried and failed to suppress a laugh. “You better not be laughing Dark Dragon.”

“Me? Never.” Hak insisted as Jaeha hid a smile in his hand and asked, “That sounded familiar.”

“Of course it should; I’m copying the Captain.” Yona told him with a smirk.

“This is beyond ridiculous; run them out of town.” The official ordered.

“Yona!!!” Yun half-scolded, half-whined.

“Sorry Yun, but I’ve already committed myself to fight for the people of Kouka.”

“Sounds like there’s no choice but to obey the Boss.” Hak agreed as he led the charge against the
troops.

It was far beyond one-sided. “Do you really think for a moment that you’ll get away with this?!” The official demanded in one last burst of bravado.

“Have you learned your lesson? Don’t come near this village again.” Yona ordered with her hands on her hips. “If anything happens to this village we the…”

“Dark Dragon…”

“And the Happy Hungry Bunch!”

“…you won’t get off so easily!”

_I don’t think this is what Ik-su had in mind when he said these guys would change Kouka…_

Chapter End Notes

Yeah…me and depression are old friends.

About 70,000 years ago, there was a super volcanic eruption in Lake Toba, what is now Sumatra, Indonesia. While it’s not universally accepted, there is speculation that this created a ‘bottleneck’, reducing the human (Homo sapien) population to between 3,000 and 10,000 breeding pairs. Genetic evidence indicates that all living humans are descended from the same small population ca. 70,000 years ago. This does not guarantee a casual link, but it seems likely, given the proximity of the two events. This concludes the nerd portion of our program. My source is ‘History’s Worst Disasters’ by Eric Chaline.

Bit worried when I finally read volume 10 and Kan Tae-Jun said would be deserters are punished heavily, but then I realized that while he’d know how the system is meant to work, Zeno would have seen how it’s actually working.
“Damn Hak, how hard did you throw this?” Jaeha asked once he, Hak, and Kija arrived at where Shin-ah had indicated his weapon had landed.

It was buried nearly up to the base of the blade in the ground. “Not that hard, I thought…” Hak found himself stumbling back as he pulled it out, finding it easier than he had expected to remove.

“I had thought that your strength was the result of you fully healing from that wound you had, but now I’m not so sure.” Kija admitted as they started back.

“It’s felt lighter, since Awa.” Hak told them.

Lately, he found himself (reluctantly) getting along better with White Snake and Droopy Eyes. It was probably a result of him mentally conceding to Yona to ‘play nice’ with them, but he also had a feeling it had as much to do with their shared devotion to Yona.

“I should ask Baa-Baa to check the archives and see if anything similar happened to Hiryuu-ou-sama’s Queen. Although from what I remember of the tales, she had been scary enough on her own.” Kija proposed. “Even though Hime-sama doesn’t believe herself to be his reincarnation.”

“I’d say it doesn’t really matter; the dragon’s blood recognizes her as him.” Jaeha reminded him. “And while it doesn’t seem like she consciously believes it, I think some part of her realizes it.”

Then he realized what Kija had said. “Wait, he’d been married?”

“Yes. She had been ruler of the lands that would become the Wind Tribe. I think her name was…”

“Ha-kun.” Hak cut in. “Her name was Ha-kun. There’s an old myth in Wind about the leader Hiryuu-ou had defeated to bring them into Kouka. The leader’s name was Ha-kun.” He continued before either could ask how he knew her name.

No way was he going to admit to having been her before Yona admitted to having been Hiryuu.

“Maybe you calling him Ankoukuryuu is truer than you thought.” Jaeha teased Kija. “Even if he’s not really evil.”

“I should be receiving a message from Baa-Baa soon. She said she was going to offer Seiryuu Village safe haven with us.” Kija added. “I’m not sure if they’ll accept, given their views…”

Seeing Jaeha’s questioning look, Hak let Kija pull ahead, hanging back. “They had forgotten all the lore about the dragons, and view the Seiryuu as a curse. He didn’t even have a name until Hime-san gave him one, beyond ‘Seiryuu’. It’s why he wears a mask.” He told Jaeha in a quiet voice.

“…I always thought all the other dragons were happy being enslaved. Though my village just hate the Ryokuryuu; not fear them.” Jaeha revealed. “Kija’s the way I thought the other dragons were, but if Shin-ah’s village forgot all about the dragons…being feared is likely worse than being chained, especially for someone as kind-hearted as him. And Zeno…I wonder how bad it was for him to have left it a long time ago. For him to choose wandering over a settled life.”
“It might be a good thing to spend some time as a bandit.” Yona commented after the trio returned with Hak’s weapon. Shin-ah, having gotten his fluff back from Hak, was in fur ball mode trying to warm up. Zeno cuddled up with him. “Shin-ah’s so cute! Kaya wants to hug him too, but she’ll just make him colder.” Kaya squealed. “So cuddle with him more in my place Zeno!”

Shin-ah blushed at Kaya’s comment, unknown to the others.

“You WERE a pirate a short time ago.” Jaeha added.

“True; I guess I can be anything I want, away from the castle.”

“Don’t talk about it like it’s a casual career change!” Yun scolded, horrified.

“We’ve already said who we are, so we kinda have to follow through with it.” Hak pointed out.

“Are you crazy?! We’ve got to get out of here, fast! They’re bound to be back, with a ton more troops next time!”

“Lad, by Zeno’s last count, there were nearly two hundred villages in a similar state to Katan, or worse.” Zeno said with a frown. “Heavily taxed, with land overworked to the point where they can barely produce the minimum amount of food to survive, let alone what is demanded by the taxes. And it’s only getting worse.”

“Then it’s decided.” Yona declared. “We’ll become lawless bandits, and slowly expand our turf, and protect citizens who’ve been forced to pay unreasonably high taxes.”

“It’s not that simple!” Yun protested. “If the villages fall behind on the taxes, the officials will only get stricter about collecting. Even if it works short-term, one wrong move will have troops from Saika down on our heads!”

“It’s already a possibility, and one I accept.” Yona answered calmly. “If I have to ignore starving and sick people to keep myself safe, I’ll gladly accept danger over that. Besides,” She looked over at her dragons. “I don’t think we’ll lose, given whose on our side.”

Yun wasn’t quite ready to give up his protest. “But—“

“Yun, I’m sure you’re the only one of us who could possibly come up with the best way to intimidate the officials.” Yona said with a smile, making Yun turn pink.

“Is it me, or are all of them falling a little bit in love with her?” Shuten asked. “I mean, Hak’s a given, Zeno’s has some kind of love for her…”

“Kija’s likely as devoted to her as a person as he is to her as the master of the Four Dragon Warriors, she’s damn near the whole world to Shin-ah, and Jaeha couldn’t keep away from her.” Guen continued.

“Can you really blame them? It’s not like we’re any different.” Abi reminded them. “All of us love her, even if we’re not in love with her. And if Yun’s any indication, it’s all her, not the dragon’s blood.”

“The thread that binds us all.” Kaya affirmed, as Yun gave in, Zeno cheering, “The Happy Hungry
Bunch is in business!

“NO ONE WILL FEAR A NAME LIKE THAT!!!”

“There won’t be any trouble as long as you store every ounce carefully away for your own consumption.” Yona assured the village headman with a smile that had a little too many teeth showing to be comfortable. *Glad I let Abi talk me out of doing the stereotype of a bandit, at least in my case…even though Zeno is scarily good at it.*

For as old as he was chronologically, physically he was still seventeen.

Meaning it doesn’t take all that much to bore him. He had literally tried his hand at anything and everything at some point, barring prostitution. Even if there was one memorable time where he came close and trained as a ‘female entertainer’.

“Hmm…the next village the officials will be heading to is Shu Village. Jaeha, you go back to Katan, in case the officials come back.” Yun said, considering. “Raiju and Kija definitely have to go to Shu Village.”

“Zeno will stay with the Miss!” Kija grabbed onto his shoulder. “I’m teaching you how the Four Dragon Warriors are supposed to fight. You’re coming.”

“Wha—?”

“Shin-ah, please watch over Hime-sama.” Kija hefted Zeno onto his shoulder, Zeno slumping in resignation.

“…it’s so quiet with the others gone.” Yona commented as she sat down next to Shin-ah, who was playing with Ao.

“Yeah…”

Normally, she would have been perfectly fine sitting there with Shin-ah and Ao in comfortable silence, but today she was restless. “I know you don’t want to spar with me, but can I watch you practice?” She asked.

After a moment’s thought, he nodded, standing up to do as she suggested.

She watched him carefully. *I already knew I need to build up muscle and speed, but this just affirms it. His slashes are different from the style him-me learned; it’s one born of practical use, not a formal school. “Who taught you the sword, Shin-ah? Your predecessor?”*

He stopped. “…yes. He told me…never to use the Eyes.”

“I don’t know why blue brother made the power the way it is. Maybe to keep the user from becoming too cocky; I don’t know.” She reflected, hugging her knees.

It reminded him that she was aware of having been Hiryuu-ou, something that usually didn’t infringe on everyday life. She knew all about the Dragon’s Eyes, and, based on what he had overheard in the cave, she was aware of the time he had disobeyed Ao.

It was when she was standing in front of him, cradling his face that he realized he had started curling in on himself. “You know I’ll never ask you to use the Eyes.” She reminded him quietly. “It would be nice to look you in the eye when I talk to you. The only thing that would be nicer to see would be
to see your smile.” She commented with a smile of her own.

“The Dark Dragon and the Happy Hungry Bunch’s Boss Lady!” One of the village children, whom she had given candy to earlier, broke up the moment. “You have any more candy?”

“No…” Everyone’s stomach grumbled at that statement. “Let’s see if I can find a bird to shoot down.” Grabbing her bow and quiver, she went in search of food.

“Where’d all the birds go?” Yona complained under her breath. “Hak and everyone else is running late…”

“I’m hungry, Boss Lady.” The kid reminded her.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find something.” A scream distracted her.

There was a crowd of dirty and harsh-looking men…and a child bleeding on the ground.

*Shit! Real bandits!*

Then she noticed what one of them was holding. *Shin-ah’s sword! How’d they get that?!*

Sending a pulse of alarm to the moon, she looked around frantically, spotting a ladder. “Stay out of sight, alright?” She told the child as she grabbed the ladder.

Resting it on the side of a house, she clambered up. “GET YOUR ASSES OUT OF HERE!” She yelled, firing an arrow and catching one of them on the arm. Even from her vantage point, she could see the arrow cut deep, cutting muscle. “LEAVE BEFORE I KILL YOU!!”

“What the—it’s a girl!”

“For real?!”

“This village is the property of the Dark Dragon and the Happy Hungry Bunch! We’re not handing anything over to you pathetic excuses for bandits!” She could feel Shin-ah getting closer.

“The who?”

“I’m not repeating myself! Leave or the next arrow starts taking out skulls!” For all her bravado, she was still uneasy. *There’s too many, especially with Shin-ah weaponless…*

“Woah, calm down sweetheart. Just what have we done wrong?” One of them, evidently the leader, asked, hands up in a placating manner.

“For starters, there’s a child bleeding—“ There was a hand on her ankle, and she turned to see one the bandits.

She had no leverage to fight back, and then she was on the ground, dazed.

“Huh, she’s better looking than I thought. Lucky us.” As the leader heaved her up onto his shoulder, there was a commotion. *Shin-ah…*

She had moved her dagger from her sash to between her breasts, but there were too many bandits around to be able to draw it and kill the man carrying her. “Put me down you bastard!” *Maybe if I struggle enough…*
“Now really, girls shouldn’t use language like that.” One of them mock-scolded. “Then again, a girl shouldn’t be using any language, unless we order her to beg.” He grabbed her chin and squeezed her cheeks.

“I’ll use whatever language I want, mother—” There was an unfamiliar yell, and she realized it was Shin-ah yelling.

The bandit moved so she could see he’d been stabbed, and had fallen to the ground. “SHIN-AH!” She redoubled her efforts. “You’ve got what you’ve came for, so there’s no reason to keep hurting people!”

That remark earned her a backhand, and rage, her own and the moon’s, filled her. “Shut up you bitch! You’re the only who put an arrow in me!”

“You attacked a chil—“

The one carrying her snorted. “In lands like this, human life means nothing. It’s kill or be killed. To keep from starving, or to have anything good in life…in a place like this, the only way is to kill people. You’re pretty plump for a Fire Tribe girl in these parts.” He slapped her ass and squeezed. “Obviously you’re never been hungry enough to where killing people is the best idea ever.”

*Screw it—*

Before she could start for her dagger, a wave of dark power washed over her, and the bandits around Shin-ah fell, dead.

He was maskless, and there was an ugly, hungry, dead look in his eyes.

“URGH, MY ARMS ARE GONE!!!” The man carrying her screamed, arms falling limp and useless to his sides.

As soon as the man carrying her dropped her, Yona ran to Shin-ah. “Shin-ah! Eyes on me!” She yelled, grabbing his face and making him look her in the eye.

“You crazy, lady! He’ll devour you!” One of the bandits screamed, dragging a now useless leg.

“Look right at me, Shin-ah.” She continued, ignoring him. “If you really want to devour me, then do it. But I’ll never look away from your eyes.” It occurred to her that this was the first time she was really looking into his eyes. Dreams didn’t match reality, and when he had willing unmasked for her the night she named him, she didn’t push it, and looked at his eyes, not into them.

Then she was before a dark mass of power, shaped like a dragon, and she realized the horrible truth.

This wasn’t just a representation of Seiryuu’s power.

It was the Seiryuu, every bearer of the Dragon’s Eyes who had lived and died blinded, who were called curses.

Being treated as a curse in life had turned them into one after death, building and building each generation.

There was confusion and rage, strong enough to make her shiver.

Confusion, because for as much as they wanted to devour her, they couldn’t. The power of the dragons cannot be turned against its master.
Rage, not only because she couldn’t be devoured, but because she hadn’t come for one of them.

She laid a hand on the dragon’s snout. “All I can do is offer apologies, for not coming for any of you. But I will not let you use Shin-ah to wreak revenge on the world you weren’t allowed to see.” She whispered, before turning to the task of pulling Shin-ah out of their thrall.

“Shin-ah…I’m right here with you. No matter what your true nature is, no matter who you hurt… when I took you out of that hole in the ground, I was choosing to live with you. And a promise; to stay by your side as long as you’ll permit me, and do everything I can to help you live freely.” Tears pricked her eyes.

“I will never reject your powers; they are a part of you; proof that you are alive.” She continued. “Kija and Jaeha have to live with their powers too, and Zeno has lived with his for far too long. But that’s not the same, is it? Right now, you’re doing something you’ve never wanted to do. I won’t let you do anything that you don’t want to do. Don’t let it overwhelm you, and let me protect you, as you’ve protected me.”

She rested her head against the dragon’s. “If you can hear me, please answer…Shin-ah…my moonlight…”

“Y-Yona…” Suddenly she was back in the real world, and Shin-ah was looking at her, and seeing her.

She smiled at him, dimly aware of the activity around her, as the others arrived and began dealing with the bandits. “I’m glad that my voice was able to reach you.”

She only just caught him as his power snapped back onto him, paralyzing him. He was too heavy for her to remain standing, and she eased down into a kneeling position, his head in her lap. “Y-Yona… run…I don’t…” There was a lump in his throat, and while he couldn’t feel it, he knew tears were starting. “…you should get away from me…I’m just a weak, disgusting…monster…”

_I don’t want to lose her. I don’t want my power to make her hate me…and cast me away, leaving me nameless…_

Her cloak covered his head like a shield, and a hand rested over his eyes. “I know that your power doesn’t work the way you’d like it too. That’s natural. But, the way ahead…isn’t to close your eyes and seal it back up. You need to open your eyes, and claim your power; make it yours.” It felt like her torch was surrounding him, pulsing a complex mix: love, care, sorrow, hope, relief…

“Those who can do that are strong, and are people I admire. I need to get stronger too, so you’re not put in a situation where you’re forced to do something you hate again. So…let’s get stronger together.” Yona’s presence felt different, and Shin-ah had a sense of a man overlaying her, taking part in her actions. “Does that sound like a plan, Shin-ah?”

“…together?” Even those her torch told him she wasn’t lying, he still had a hard time believing it.

“Yes.”

“I can…stay here?”

“Of course.” One of her hands grabbed his and squeezed. The warmth of her hand that he felt despite the paralysis, and the torch warming his heart left him feeling relaxed, even as he felt the sick stabs of joy as he surveyed the destruction he’d caused.

_I’m still terrified, of what my eyes can do. But…if Yona is there, to call me by name…I’ll go_
anywhere.

She named me for the light of the moon, and I want to carry that name proudly.

Chapter End Notes

Okay everyone, group glomp onto Shin-ah! But carefully, since he's just been stabbed.
“How’s Shin-ah doing, Yun?” Yona asked, looking in the tent.

“I put senju herb on the stab wound, so that’s doing okay. Not sure how long the paralysis will last however, with how long he’s kept the power bottled up.” Yun shoved Zeno and Kija out of the tent, as Kija took offense to Zeno’s offer to help Shin-ah with his power. “If you’re gonna fight then do it outside!”

“You don’t use your dragon powers at all in battle! You just play around!” Kija just couldn’t understand Zeno. How can he not care at all? He’s as devoted to Hime-sama as the rest of us…

“Kija, Shin-ah doesn’t use his power very often either, so don’t try and force Zeno to.” Yona scolded. “Hakuryuu and Ryokuryuu are the arms and legs of the King, Seiryuu is the eyes, and Ouryuu the body. Keeping everyone happy is just as important as fighting, so let it be.”

Kija and Jaeha, just returned from dumping the bandits on the road, traded looks. Yun stuck his head out and looked between the pair and Yona, confused.

“I wonder if Ouryuu’s power has a penalty for its use, like Seiryuu’s.” Jaeha pondered later, after the funeral for the boy who was killed. “It’s not mentioned in the stories, but then again, neither was Seiryuu’s penalty.”

“Hime-sama has known Zeno for several years now, so she must have seen his power in action, and doesn’t want to force him to use it.” Kija said. “With Shin-ah, I can understand him not saying anything about his power, given his reluctance to speak up on his own, but Zeno’s talkative enough.”

“He’s talkative, but how much has he actually said?” Yun questioned. “The only information we have is what he’s told us directly. We can guess he’s spent a lot of time alone, since he’s always saying his name, and spent most of that time on the move, since I can’t recall him using anyone else’s name.”

Jaeha debated mentioning the girl ghost he had spotted around Zeno at times, but Kija and Yun had never showed any reaction to ghosts and spirits, so he decided against it.

“’Invulnerable body’…” Yun mused, hand to his chin. “We’ve already seen that it doesn’t make him immune to injury, since Hak clearly hurt him, and he apparently can’t get drunk or be poisoned... Maybe it’s some kind of super healing?”

“Ouryuu is the Shield of the King.” The three of them jumped, and turned to find Zeno perched in the tree Jaeha had been leaning on. “It’s no good on the front lines like Hakuryuu and Ryokuryuu.”

“How long have you been up there?!” Kija exclaimed, clutching his heart.

Zeno looked amused. “Zeno was here first.”

“How can you hide your presence from us? I could never track you once you got to Awa’s walls.” Jaeha demanded.
“It’s a secret!” Zeno exclaimed, making Yun and Kija growl. “Would it hurt to show us some trust?” Kija asked, frustrated with Zeno and his careless attitude.

Zeno cocked an eyebrow, looking oddly serious again. “‘Trust’? If it’s a question of trust, then Ryokuryuu can start by showing his leg, and Hakuryuu can show the scars on his back.”

Both Kija and Jaeha paled, and Jaeha reached for his knives. “We’ve only been direct brothers in arms, as it were, for not even a month. Not even the Miss, who’s known Zeno the longest, knows very much.”

It was technically true; ‘Yona’ didn’t know a whole lot, but ‘Hiryuu’ did.

“The power of Ouryuu can be more fearsome than the full power of Seiryuu’s eyes.” He continued with a sigh. “It is for when the other dragons are not enough, ever since the beginning.”

“Why do you say that?” Yun asked, curious.

“Why do you think Hakuryuu Village, which has preserved the most from that time, has no mention of Ouryuu’s power? The power wasn’t called upon in that time.” The trio on the ground could barely hide their shock at the slightly bitter tone Zeno’s voice took.

Zeno spun around his branch, using the momentum to leap to another tree, far enough away that only Jaeha could have likely reached it without the extra momentum.

Repeating the process, he disappeared from their view.

Tense silence fell over the trio. Not able to find words, they drifted their separate ways.

Kija’s mind flashed to the scars on his back. How could Zeno have known about them? I know they can’t be felt through my clothing, and I can’t think of any time where he could have seen them. He DOES seem familiar, but from where or when I can’t say...

“...I know Abi’s never said what happened, before you and Guen saved him...but...I can’t help thinking it would have been better; if I’d been the one kidnapped.”

Shuten just blinked at him. “The hell? What are you on about?”
Zeno’s eyes were filled with ancient pain, and Shuten was reminded that while both of them had experienced over two thousand years, Zeno was the one who had lived through every second of them…alone. “Things wouldn’t’ve been different if it’d been you instead of Abi.” He said, cottoning onto what he meant.

Zeno didn’t answer, just walking away on a meandering path back to camp, stalling until he could fake it.

The days after Father’s death were a whirl of activity. Funeral rites, ascension rites, meetings…

“Let me get this straight.” Hiryuu said to the councilors three days after his father’s death. “Despite being old enough to marry, you don’t feel I’m old enough to rule?”

“There is still much to be learned, Hiryuu-sama, and it would be for the best if your official ascension was delayed until your eighteenth or nineteenth year.” The (self-) appointed leader, a man called Yan, respectfully explained.

“…I want you to think very carefully before you answer my next question, honored councilors.” He said evenly. “We are only having this discussion because His Late Majesty was murdered by someone seeking to claim the throne for another.” The stench of fear was heavy as he met each councilor’s eyes. “Right now I’m finding it very hard to place much trust in anyone. What guarantee do I have that I’d live long enough to officially claim my throne?”

The councilors could only sputter parts of words, not knowing how to answer his question…and betraying their intentions. “Get out. My ascension will proceed as planned. I would hate to lose any scrap of experience in a time such as this.” He was reasonably certain at least one of the councilors had lost control of their bladder, as each hurriedly bowed and fought at the door, all of them trying to exit at the same time.

Now alone save for Guen and Mun, he slumped on the table. “I know most of them were skunking around during the fight; why are they trying this?” He complained, resting his head on the desk. “Hu-people are weird…”

“Unfortunately such things can happen, when they feel the ruler is young enough and weak enough to be manipulated. Even if you likely know more than them.” Mun commented, taking a seat.

“Not really. I don’t know how it relates to human timeframe, but I’m barely sixteen by dragon reckoning. I was the baby of the Dragon Gods, so it’s not like I can claim experience by either count. Not that they’d know that… And they’re just the start; there’s still our allies…and Yuhon.” He pointed out.

Despite his misgivings, he ordered Zheng’s body be returned to his father Yuhon, in the minor province of Chi. “Did you really have to send his body back?” Guen complained, getting a dirty look from Mun.

“We don’t know if Zheng was acting with Yuhon’s knowledge or not. His next move after killing Father and myself could just as likely have been killing his own father. If he does back what his son did, we’ll deal with it when it happens.” Hiryuu played with his hair, still not used to its new, shorter length, now only reaching his shoulders instead of the middle of his back.

“So what are your plans for the future, Hiryuu-sama?” Mun asked.

“For the next few days and weeks? Just get through each day. Farther out? Unite the kingdoms and provinces under one banner, so people don’t have to live in fear of offending the wrong lord or
senseless feuds destroying their lands and lives.” He replied. “You are allowed to complain about how I’m a fool for aiming for something impossible.” He reminded Mun, who did not look thrilled with his long-term plan.

“You make it sound so simple, but it’s really not. Half the time when they meet, the leaders can’t even decide on who sits where. And that’s when they can agree on a meeting place to start with!” Guen exclaimed.

“Would asking them to come to me, and assigning seats for the meeting help?” He asked. “I’m sure they’d at least be united in sizing me up, and if we work out seating arrangements beforehand…”

“…they’ve never actually tried assigned seating,” Mun admitted, a little shame-faced. “Then again, most times they’re trying to agree that a meeting is necessary.”

“I can’t meet with them until after the mourning period, so we have time to figure this out.”

The seventh day after his father’s death was his enthronement ceremony. He walked in, got an ornate headdress placed on his head, and received the fealty of the major clan heads.

Wisely, he kept his confusion over the significance of the ceremony to himself.

After the fealty was sworn, he was directed to the castle’s shrine room, to spend the night in solitude, praying to the gods for aid in his rule, that it be a just and fair one.

Once the door was shut, he took off the surprisingly heavy headdress. Kneeling down, he studied it. “…I never expected any of this. A simple desire to experience life as a human has turned into something vastly more complicated. I don’t know what the right course is; all I know is that the people deserve to live without fear, without undue hardship. They say the people should lay down their lives for the King, but I don’t want any more people dead because of me.

“I will do everything in my power to protect the people now under my rule. Not as a god or a dragon, but as a human, as a King. And if it means laying down my life for them, then so be it.”

“It makes sense to assign seats in a meeting, given how prickly some of the lords are…” Su-won commented to himself, surveying his recent work. “I get the feeling Yona has much the same view on kingship as Hiryuu-ou…as she gave Hiryuu-ou…”

Why is it so hard to remember that this is just a story? Is it because she’s making Hiryuu-ou into a person and not a myth? Although…

The more I translate…the more I believe it.

Shin-ah opened his eyes to the field where he and Yona had always met in the dreams. His head lay in someone’s lap, and he didn’t need to look to know it belonged to his ancestor, Abi.

The paralysis afflicting him in real life carried over, so he couldn’t run away.

Before he could sink into his shame, over having lost control, Abi spoke. “I lost control once.”

“!” Shin-ah uttered a noise of surprise.

“After Hiryuu-sama died, I was kidnapped by those wanting the power of the dragons for themselves. Guen and Shuten were too deadly to be attacked, and Zeno’s power wasn’t known of.
Their hideout was where, generations later, the clan flee to after the incident when you were four. They wanted proof that the Eyes worked as the rumors said. They had kidnapped women, to sell, and they ordered me to use the Eyes on them. I refused, and the beatings started.

“At some point, I just…snapped. And gave them what they wanted.

“A demonstration.”

Abi’s frame tensed, self-loathing clear in the action. “I…played with them, paralyzing them in stages. Then Hiryuu-sama’s presence surrounded me, and I could hear his voice, drawing me out of its thrall. I passed out, and didn’t really wake up until after Guen and Shuten had rescued me. In some ways, what I did was worse, since you have the additional burden of your predecessors using you to lash out at the sights they were denied.”

Shin-ah wasn’t sure how to react to that. It was a weird sense of relief, knowing that he wasn’t the only one put in that position, and wishing he could find words to comfort Abi.

“You should really stop beating yourself up over that.”

A crimson-haired man who could have been Yona’s twin was standing in front of them. “I’ll always be there to draw you out should it happen again, Abi, so please let go of the guilt and shame. Just as Yona will always be there to draw you out, Shin-ah.” The man—Hiryuu-ou—beamed at both of them.

“…I hadn’t expected to see you until after Yona’s death.” Abi admitted.

“She’s grown in her power, so I’m not bound to her anymore.” He explained. “Not that I’m really doing much; it’s her life to live, after all. But if I had realized you were still beating yourself up over what happened, I’d have brought this up centuries ago.”

There was a familiar warmth filling Shin-ah, one he associated with Yona being intimate with Hak. “I’m glad we never had to feel when you and Ha-kun-sama were doing stuff.” Abi commented.

“…I like the warmth…” Shin-ah admitted with a blush. Somehow, even though Hiryuu-ou wasn’t Yona, he felt as safe with him as he did with her. “Kija and Jaeha have more trouble dealing with it, and Zeno ignores it.”

“Zeno also has Kaya.” Hiryu-ou pointed out.

“Really? Again?” Jaeha grumbled as the torch pulsed with desire and arousal.

“It’s not our place to intrude on Hime-sama and Hak, no matter what we think of it.” Kija said with a blush. “Why aren’t you bothered by it, Zeno?” He asked.

With Shin-ah’s injury, Zeno wound up sleeping with him, as Jaeha flatly refused.

“Zeno just enjoys it without worrying.” He explained quietly. “Then again, Zeno loves the Miss, but isn’t in love with her.”

Kija’s blush filled his face, and Jaeha rolled over and glared at Zeno. “I’m not—“

“Why do you think—?!?”
“Well, Ryokuryuu would probably want both the miss and the mister.” Zeno said, considering. “He can’t tell you how to handle it, since it’s up to Ryokuryuu and Hakuryuu to sort out their own feelings.”

Jaeha eyed the girl ghost kneeling at Zeno’s head. More like he has an outlet for the feedback. Sitting up, Jaeha stalked off to deal with the hard-on, making sure to not go towards where he felt Yona.

I’m certain Hak really would kill me if I peeped…or I might be tempted to join…

Jaeha gone, Kija found his face cooling. Despite the incident that afternoon, it felt right to confide a little in Zeno, even if he was still confused and wary how he knew of the scars. “I don’t think I’m in love with Hime-sama.” He began. “I know I’d like to be in Hak’s position…and if she ever asked it of me I’d gladly service her…”

Zeno sighed. “Zeno doesn’t know what to tell Hakuryuu. But do you want to be with her because she’s our master, or because of who she is as a person? Zeno thinks if you figure that out, you’ll know what to do.”

“I’m not happy Hak.” Yona told him, having led him away once everyone was asleep (or faking it). “We can’t keep dancing around me and swords.”

Hak said nothing, sensing this was a moment where what was required of him was to listen.

“…I’m angry at myself, for not being able to bring myself to order you to teach me. I know you see me as your master, but to me, you’re my Consort, my partner. On some level, it scares me…how far you’d go if I ordered it. You would stand there and let me kill you if I ordered it. I…” Swallowing, she took a breath to steady herself. “You are teaching me sword arts, effective in the morning. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Hime-sama.” Hak replied as he knelt, bowing his head.

She walked over, to stand in front of him. Grabbing his head, she pulled him into a kiss.

In the fire, he could read the conflict inside.

The burden of living up to the legacy of her past self was sinking in, and she was scared of failing to live up to the loyalty all of them granted her.

The dark flame whispered to her. Of how he was still leery of letting her fight, no matter how now, protecting her meant letting her protect herself. Of how he thought she was overthinking things. “Am I overthinking this?” She murmured against his lips when the kiss broke.

“Yes. Stop trying to categorize things. And nothing you could do will break my loyalty to you. Not even if you ordered it.” He replied, edging his hand up her skirt.

Her eyes were only half-open as she caught the hint. “Then attend to me.”

His hand teased the backs and insides of her thighs, painfully close to where she wanted to feel them. “Touch my folds.” She whispered, cottoning onto what he was aiming to do.

She bit her lip as he did as she ordered, feather-light. She widened her stance to give him more access, clinging to his shoulders. “Touch my nub.”

It was harder than he had anticipated to ignore his arousal in favor of hers. Harder, because the thrill
it gave him was stronger than he’d ever imagined, stronger than when she had teased and ordered him to his climax. He focused on how she clung to him, eyes looking down at where his hand moved her skirt.

She fought to keep her breathing even. “Taste me.”

Shifting to where he was sitting flat on the ground, her legs were on either side of him as he pulled her skirt over his head, licking a stripe up her folds to her nub. It didn’t take much to tip her over at that point, drenching his face and chin.

Pulling back, she sank down to straddle his legs. Her hand was in his pants and holding him before he quite realized it. She joined him in cleaning her juices off of his face as she stroked, teasing the head and slit with the calluses she had gained through archery. “Come for me.” She ordered against his lips, stroking him through as he did just that.

Flopping back to lay on the ground, she curled up on his chest and he cradled her. “I have said how much I appreciate what you remember of his solo fun, right?” He said after a few minutes.

“I can’t say if you have or not, but I appreciate what you’ve subconsciously remembered from her so we’re even.” She replied. “Carry me back?”

“So spoiled.” He mock-complained as he grabbed her and stood. “…we good?”

“Yes…I’m sorry if I took it out on you.” She apologized. “I just don’t want Shin-ah to be put in that situation again. So I’ve got to get stronger, so that when he uses his power in the future, it’s his choice.”

“So why couldn’t you get him to teach you?”

“I did go to him, but he nicked me and ran away, so he won’t do it now. I’ve only seen Jaeha use throwing knives, Kija fights barehanded, and Zeno just knows how to hit the vitals quickly and accurately.” She admitted. “How much longer before they’ll send troops, you think?”

“No clue. Not like it’ll be a huge issue.”

Chapter End Notes

Fridge Brilliance moment regarding Zeno and Shin-ah. Zeno’s main job was sticking close to Abi, and getting him out of harm’s way once he was paralyzed. So looking after Seiryuu isn’t anything new for him. In the present, while Shin-ah only uses the Eyes as a last resort, he’s not used to interacting with people in a friendly context. So in the present, Zeno is still looking after Seiryuu, only emotionally instead of physically.

My internal timeline as the Dragon Gods descending when Hiryuu is 26, physically. So ten years of ruling. Probably won’t be doing a lot of detail on that period, aside from meeting Abi, Shuten, and Zeno…and the Two Traveling Warriors/Idiots.
The next morning, Yona curled up on Shin-ah’s uninjured side, keeping him company with Ao. Zeno somehow also managed to curl up with them. “Ryokuryuu and Hakuryuu really seem to be bothered when the miss does stuff with mister.” He told her. “But Ryokuryuu seems more bothered by it then Hakuryuu.”

Yona couldn’t contain her blush. “What about the two of you?”

“I like the warmth inside, from your torch. The joy and contentment…stick out for me more than the desire and lust…” Shin-ah admitted with a faint blush of his own. Not that those aren’t enjoyable too…but why do I keep thinking of Ayumi when it happens?

“Kaya likes when Zeno feels it.” Kaya commented, with a blush and a sly look.

“Kaya…” Zeno whined, also blushing.

Ao just eyed the dragons, confused as to what was so embarrassing about mating.

“…Jaeha always has to go…uh…’deal with it’…?” Shin-ah added tentatively.

“Hakuryuu would gladly volunteer to take care of you that way miss.” Zeno told her, rolling over to look at the top of the tent. “Ryokuryuu…hard to say. But I think Hakuryuu will be okay once he figures out if what he’s feeling is because of the miss as a person or because you’re the Four Dragons’ master.”

“I think Jaeha would prefer Hak to me. Or both of us together.” Yona said slowly. “Then again, he might be reacting more because he’s…experienced? And doesn’t have someone.” She added, noticing Zeno and Kaya perking up.

Embarrassment finally tabled all verbal discourse. It’s not that Zeno doesn’t feel the same draw. He admitted to himself. But even without Kaya…he’s watched her grow up from a baby to a young woman, and he’ll have to watch her age and die the way Ou-sama never got to. Add Kaya in…it would just be too awkward; and it’s too weird to even imagine, even with Kaya and mister taking part too…

Kaya, sensing some of what was going through his head, laid a hand on his arm. ‘Kaya would never want to stand between the two of you. But Zeno is right. It’s too weird and awkward to picture.’ Sending him a look out of the corner of her eye, she walked through the fabric of the tent.

“Zeno will be back later!” He chirped as he quickly followed her.

Zeno and Kaya seem to do stuff more than even Yona and Hak. Shin-ah reflected.

“How are you feeling, after what happened the other day?” Yona finally asked.

“I saw him. When Abi came to me in the field.” Shin-ah answered. “I’m scared…but, if you’re there…”

Her eyes widened at that tidbit. “You did?” She whispered.
The paralysis had loosened enough for Shin-ah to nod slightly. “He looks like you.”

“It’s the other way around to be honest, since he was first.” She gently pointed out. “I wonder how I can appease them. It’s not like the Hakuryuu clinging to Kija; they had been longing for a master to come. These…its rage. I don’t know if I’ll be able to help you with them.” She admitted.

“As long as you’re there to bring me out of the darkness…I’ll find a way.” Shin-ah assured her, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

Zeno jogged to catch up with Kaya. Grabbing her hand when he caught up to her, he felt the shiver of shifting from the mortal plane to hers. “Zeno doesn’t need to worry what Kaya thinks. She knows sex doesn’t factor into what you share with Yona.” She assured him, interlacing their fingers.

Zeno couldn’t help looking sheepish. “Zeno can’t help but worry a little. But it is a little strange.”

“?"

“Before Kaya, Zeno…was never really interested in anyone that way.” He admitted with a blush. “He’d wake up hard in the mornings before everything happened, but not after.”

‘…that would be because of me.’ The hazy image of Ouryuu-kami appeared before them, curled with what appeared to be an outline of a sleeping dragon. ‘Intercourse bought you more time than merely living in each other’s presence would have. Since I never intended the power to be passed down, it seemed…’

“Unnecessary?” Zeno commented flatly.

Ouryuu-kami just nodded, before fading away. “…for the dragon gifted with genuine foresight, he really didn’t think things through.” Zeno complained with a sigh. “I guess humans really are incomprehensible to dragons, just as they can be incomprehensible to us.”

“He seemed different, than when he came for me when…” Kaya commented, averting her eyes at the end.

“Probably because Zeno and Ouryuu-kami are closer to each other now. Just as Zeno can pull knowledge without thinking from him, he can act like a teenager.” Unlacing their fingers, Zeno grabbed her waist and pulled her close. “But that just makes Kaya even more special.”

“…how so?” She asked with a heavy blush.

“Even if it was initially for Zeno’s sake, he still cared enough to give us more time together. By the time he could keep you at my side, even when I had no idea you were there…he likely feels for you like I do. I think the dragon curled up with him is meant to be your dragon self.” He explained with a fond smile.

Kaya just blushed harder, as impossible as it seemed. “…wow…” She whispered. “Kaya hopes she can live up to both of your feelings.”

“Kaya needn’t worry about that.” He assured her as she wrapped an arm around his waist.

Sharing smiles tinged with blushes, they continued their walk.

“So they’ve sent soldiers to capture us?” Hak asked that night, having missed the earlier happenings.
“Looks like it. The one I’m guessing was the leader was rather…” Kija paused, not sure how to describe the gaunt man who had wanted to die by his claws.

“Pathetic?” Jaeha suggested.

“The one guy with him, his keeper I think, said he had ‘love problems’ but I’ve never heard of anyone acting like he did because of love.” Yun added.

“Do we have a name for the guy tasked with catching us?” Hak asked, a faint suspicion growing.

Yun hummed to himself as he thought back. “…I think he was called Tae-Jun.”

Yona started. “Kan Tae-Jun?!”

“Is he important?” Kija asked with a blink.

“He’s the lackluster second son of the Fire General, Kan Su-jin. We ran into him and some troops before you found us.” Hak replied, directing the last bit to Yun.

“So he’s the reason you two fell off a cliff?” Yun asked flatly, unimpressed.

Kija’s arm expanded and Zeno latched onto Jaeha to try and keep him from leaping off.

“During the fight, Hak barely caught himself when he fell the cliff. I tried to pull him up, and I got overbalanced when Tae-Jun and the few remaining troops were approaching to try and pull me away from Hak.” Yona explained. “About the only thing he did to me was grab my hair to try and stop me from going to Hak. I had to grab his sword and cut myself free.” She added, fingering her hair.

“White’s right, though, he DID look kind of pathetic.” Yun agreed with Kija’s description.

“Ah, that was always his normal state to me.” Hak pointed out. “So, what do we do?”

“I’d rather not kill troops if we don’t have to, since that would just bring more of them on top of us, and potentially a more capable commander.” Yona said as she pondered.

“Frankly, I’d need to see him for myself to really figure out what to do.”

“No way; he could report your presence to Kuuto!” Hak exclaimed, his original dislike of Tae-Jun combining with his new dragon possessiveness making him worry even more.

“I just have to see him; he doesn’t have to see me.” She pointed out. “Yun, can you tell me more about the encounter?”

Yun hummed to himself as he thought back. “There didn’t seem to be that many troops with him; probably no more than a dozen. They were looking for the taxes, but the main purpose is to catch us. Though they’re calling us the ‘Famished Family’.”

“…why didn’t we think of a name that awesome?” Hak complained.

“Mister!” Zeno whined. “Zeno’s name is better!”

“You do have to concede that it’s easier to remember, being alliterative.” Yona pointed out with a giggle.

“Not you too Miss!”
The next three days saw six massed charges by Kan Tae-Jun and his squad of troops, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Kija scarcely let them get close before tossing them away. “Isn’t the definition of insanity doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results?” Shuten asked after round six.

“It is.” Abi replied. “But since when have you read a dictionary?”

Jaeha somehow kept a straight face as a fight broke out. He was spotting his ancestor more often, with two others who had to be the ancestors of Kija and Shin-ah. *Wonder why I haven’t spotted Zeno’s ancestor? Not to mention why the sightings aren’t on a consistent basis.* With a quiet sigh, he followed Kija back to camp.

Shin-ah was taking a slow walk around the village, looking for Ao. The stab wound had healed extremely fast with the senju herb, fascinating Abi. *It was interesting to watch.* He conceded, making his way to where he spotted Ao, next to a man who looked like he was trying to blend in with the locals. *When I wasn’t watching Ayumi…* It strained his sight, looking that far through the mask, but for some reason, watching her helped distract him.

The man was trembling for some reason when he reached down to pick up Ao. He bowed in greeting, and the man seemed dazed as he returned it, almost on reflex. “Shin-ah, you shouldn’t be walking around so much with your injury.” Kija scolded, before noticing the strange man. “Are you alright?”

“…just a little dizzy…” He admitted, and Shin-ah just watched with a tilted head as Kija picked up the man despite his protests and went in search of Yun.

“…that’s the man the others were talking about, wasn’t it?” He asked Guen. “Shouldn’t Kija have recognized him?”

“I’m not sure Kija is that observant.” Guen admitted. “A different hairstyle shouldn’t make that much of a difference.”

“Shouldn’t you be resting?” Hak asked as he walked over.

“…got tired of just laying around.” Shin-ah admitted with a shrug. “It was a little stuffy in the tent too.”

“…Mother Yun isn’t home to keep you inside, is he?” Hak deadpanned.

Shin-ah nodded.

Zeno had seen beyond his fair share of nobles slumming to not have Tae-Jun pegged the instant he saw him. He could tell he was a complete amateur to this; his clothes were plain, true enough, but they were still visibly of a higher quality that most of Fire couldn’t afford. “Zeno will take care of him!” He assured Kija.

The boy rushed to get a small bowl of ginger broth Yona had brewed up. She was getting better at cooking, but Yun was still possessive enough of his duties to insist on doing most of the work. “Here old man! Ginger broth warms you up and helps when you’re sick!” He handed Tae-Jun the bowl.

Zeno could easily read the disgust and disbelief on his face in regards to the broth, but the action Tae-Jun took still surprised him.
He poured it out.

Somehow, Zeno was able to catch most of the broth. “YOUR BOWL! NOW!” He yelled with a glare. “Zeno’s sorry he lost some.” He apologized to the children. “May Zeno give it to the children?” He directed at Tae-Jun.

He’d give it to them regardless, but it was still Tae-Jun’s bowl, nominally. “Oh…yes…”

He needs to learn to hide his emotions better. Zeno reflected as he began licking the ginger broth off his hands, the children barely remembering to split the bowl between them. “It might look like dirty water, but in a place like this, it’s a rare treat.” He commented, drawing Tae-Jun’s attention to him. “You see how frantic they are? It’s their first meal today.”

“One bowl between them?”

“Normal for here. It makes every drop precious.” For some reason, Zeno’s thoughts turned to the ancient past, when he shared a pot of ginger broth with a pair of well-off travelers and his orphans. That’s when he first impressed me; faking satisfaction so they could have a little more in their bellies… He thought, watching Tae-Jun at least manage an apology to the children, even if it was mixed with disbelief.

“Maybe you’re too well off to understand.” He remarked, making Tae-Jun go rigid. “But take the time to look around and learn something!” He slapped his arm as he stood. “Just remember to bring snacks for everyone the next time you come!”

Zeno skipped outside, going to where Yona was standing, concealed. “Practicing sword arts, Miss?”

“Yeah… still with a wooden sword though…” She complained, slipping away with him before Tae-Jun could spot her.

“Mister sure is cautious!” Zeno commented loudly.

“He reacted; he definitely recognized your voice.” Kaya told them. “He must have recognized it the first time, too.”

“If he is looking for me, I wonder why?” Yona wondered quietly, considering the wooden sword she had indeed been practicing with.

That had been an epic struggle to get ahold of. Finally Hak had just carved out the rough shape of one…and kept paring it down until she could actually lift and practice with it.

“I understand the reasons though. It’s still remarkable to me how much stronger he’s gotten.”

“Zeno doesn’t remember her getting stronger, but then again, he thought she was scary enough already.” He reflected.

“The fire didn’t actually pass between them. There were traces, but there wasn’t enough for it to trigger until this life.” She pointed out.

Omake (?) What Hiryuu Is Up To With His Free Time

Or

Su-won’s Dreams Get Weirder
Su-won found himself in the now-familiar bed chamber. Instead of Hak, there was the crimson-haired man in his place as he kissed Yona. Su-won’s eyes were glued to the scene, the close resemblance between the two very much apparent, adding an illicit thrill.

“So this is what you’ve been up to.”

Turning to the door, he saw Hak, standing next to the woman who had spoken. She looked like she could have been Hak’s twin. “How dare you go off and start without us?” Hak accused with a darkly sexy smirk.

The crimson pair parted and looked over to them. As red-faced as their hair and still pressed together, Su-won found himself growing harder, as impossible as it seemed, at the sight. “You’re the ones who took your time.” The crimson-haired man retorted.

The woman rolled her eyes. “Either way, now I’ll just demonstrate what I was planning on doing to you on our good little voyeur.” She flicked her eyes to his hardness. “Or maybe not so little…” She amended, smirking Hak’s smirk when Su-won flushed.

He was only dimly aware of the gulp from the man as the woman sashayed over, night robe just barely preserving her modesty. Then she was kissing him, completely controlling the kiss in a way that would have made his knees shake had he been standing. She pulled back enough to speak against his mouth. “Maybe if you get laid for real you’ll be able to keep up with us.”

His blood couldn’t make up its mind to go to his hardness or to his face as she trailed a hand down his chest, calluses and faint scars making him shiver. Then she was kissing him hard again, taking him in hand. Hak was a familiar presence behind him, joining the woman in handling his hardness.

“Look.” Hak’s voice was right next to his ear, and opening eyes he didn’t realize he had closed, he saw he had been turned so Yona and the man had a perfect view of what was being done to him.

The man was now behind her, and her robe was hitched up in a way that told him that the man’s hardness had to be pressed in the cleft of her behind, if not actually seated inside of her. They watched the show with fiery eyes, fidgeting and rubbing against each other.

Su-won could only dig his fingers into Hak’s arms and hang on. Before he could even realize it was coming, the world whited out.

Su-won reluctantly groaned awake, feeling a sticky wetness in his groin that had become depressingly familiar lately. “Just what is my mind trying to tell me?”

Ha-kun sent Hiryuu a dirty look once Su-won had climaxed, the visions of Hak and Yona disappearing with him. “Really? You didn’t think to invite me?” She accused with a glare.

Hiryuu shifted uncomfortably under her glare. “…I’m sorry?” He squeaked out as she stalked over.

Crawling up the length of the bed, she only stopped once she had gotten him to back up all the way to the headboard. “Are you?” She challenged with a smirk and raised eyebrow.

Despite knowing he was in trouble, he still returned the smirk as his hand crept its way to her mound and core.

Chapter End Notes
…once again, I’m not even sorry…

Zeno and Kaya strike me as a couple who could be married for forever and still have that blushing new love feel. Probably because they’ll never get old.

Needless to say, the omake (?) do actually happen; I just can't fit them into the flow of the story.
Chapter 42

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hak couldn’t help being darkly amused at the look on Tae-Jun’s face when he caught sight of him. “…may I warm myself by your fire?” Tae-Jun managed to stutter out, blatantly terrified.

Or cold. He might not have recognized him yet.

“Huh?” Hak faked a start, like he’d been dozing. “Sure; fine by me.”

He was sure the idiot had recognized him after his second look, since the trembling increased. “What’s wrong?” Hak could no longer smother his smirk, although he did manage to tone it down. “It’s warm, yet you’re still shaking. Not used to roughing it out, are you… rich kid?” For some ungodly reason Hime-san wanted him alive.

(He recognized the practical reasoning behind it, but damnit he’s still the reason she was put in danger.)

As Tae-Jun sputtered protests, fumbling with his bag, Yun walked over. “Raiju, about tomorrow’s chores—” He cut himself off when he spotted Tae-Jun. “Huh? Who’s that?”

A tube falling from Tae-Jun’s bag landed in the fire…

…and exploded, shooting a flare high up.

I KNEW I should have killed the little bastard when he first came here…

“Oi, don’t kill him… yet. If he’s a spy, I want to question him. Plus he might be useful as a hostage.” Yun reminded Hak, who had Tae-Jun pinned and was a hair’s breath away from killing him. “Now, do you know him, Raiju?”

“This loser second son? Nope.” Hak felt like his blood was boiling, and the fire inside raged higher than in Awa. Is this what Hime-san feels?

Yun couldn’t quite contain his shiver at the dark fire in Hak’s eyes as Tae-Jun protested. “You know exactly who I am! Kan Tae-Jun!”

Yun blinked. “The general’s son?” Why is someone that important doing here?

“If you don’t let me go something bad will happen!” Tae-Jun threatened, his back where Hak was pinning him down growing bizarrely hot.

“Oh? You gonna bring all of the troops in Fire down on us?” Hak questioned.

“N-not quite. But still a lot!” Tae-Jun conceded, realizing his threat was being ignored.

“The Hungry Bunch is being summoned!” Zeno called as he skipped over. “Eh? Ginger Broth Guy?”

Ginger Broth Guy? Was the thought that was unknowingly shared between Hak, Tae-Jun, and Yun. “He’s a spy and tipped off his friends.” Hak told Zeno.
“Right.” Zeno said with a nod. “Seiryuu said there’s a bunch of troops approaching the village!”

“SAY THAT FIRST YOU IDIOT!” Yun scolded. “Not all that surprising, though.”

“Hmm…Jaeha isn’t here, and Shin-ah’s injured. Bad timing.” Yun mused, pondering their options.

“White Snake and I will take care of it.” Hak assured him.

“Zeno will do his best too!” Zeno chimed in, sending a look to Hak out of the corner of his eye as Yun expressed his doubt over Zeno’s capabilities.

_I really hope it doesn’t turn into a bloodbath; something tells me Zeno isn’t used to leaving survivors behind._ Hak thought, returning Zeno’s look with a slight nod. “So what do we do with him?” Hak asked Yun.

“He’ll be our hostage…for now.” Yun decided.

“I demand that you let me go!” Tae-Jun protested, growing a little panicked.

“Well…more panicked then he had been initially.

“The flare launching was an accident. Let me go and I can call my troops off!”

“Does he really think that’ll work?” Guen commented as Hak mockingly agreed before changing his tune. “You really think I’d agree to that? Idiot.”

“No way! With you as a hostage, we have some leverage, given your position. If we keep you, then it’s unlikely that they’ll attack us.” Yun pointed out.

“He’s already tried to kill us once. We let him go, then Saika and Hiryuu Castle will know we’re still alive.” A pulse of dark fire rippled through everyone, making the dragons, no matter their location, shiver at the rage of their master’s consort. “I’d rather kill you right now then risk that.”

Despite the terror filling him at Hak’s terrifying rage, Tae-Jun still noticed one important fact. “‘We’? Did—did you just say ‘we’?” He asked, going breathless as he followed the train of thought. “Yonahime…Yonahime is truly alive?”

The dark fire stilled as everyone stared at Tae-Jun as he continued. “Tell me…please! I…I won’t tell anyone; I swear! I don’t have to see her…I don’t even have to speak to her. Please…is she—“

“Yep, she’s alive.” Zeno crouched down in front of Tae-Jun, taking pity on him. “The Miss is the liveliest of all of us.” He assured him with a fond smile.

Everyone, living and dead, exchanged confused and surprised looks at Tae-Jun broke down crying, mumbling his gratitude for such a miracle.

“What the fuck?” Guen and Shuten chorused, unseen.

“Either he was genuinely in love with her, or the confrontation between them burned him. Extremely.” Abi commented with a sweatdrop as Yona ran over, calling to them. “Hak! Yun! Zeno! Come with me; it’s urgent.”

While he was down on the ground to start with, hearing definite proof of this miracle and the quiet command in her voice had Tae-Jun bowing lower than he could ever recall doing.

Blinking, Yona looked to Hak. “This is Kan Tae-Jun, second son of the Fire Tribe’s General Kan
Su-jin.” Hak replied formally.

“Kan Tae-Jun?” Kija, who followed her, asked. “The fiend that chased you down and nearly killed you with his troops?”

“Just now, he launched a flare that had alerted his soldiers. He’s claiming it’s a mistake, and wants us to release him to call them off.” Yun exclaimed.

“The nerve!” Kija complained. “Under normal circumstances we’d have removed your head already!”

“I…I know.” Tae-Jun conceded. “I’m fully aware of how ridiculous this sounds. But…a number of my soldiers are sure to recognize you by sight, Hime-sama. With many troops attacking at once…enough of them are sure to recognize you…and my father, Kan Su-jin, will surely learn of it!”

“Was that the plan all along?” Hak questioned.

“I—I won’t tell anyone about this!” Tae-Jun blurted out.

“You’d betray your tribe just like that? What could you possibly do to convince us?” Hak questioned, Yona watching with a neutral look on her face.

“I…don’t know. But…I swear I will stop my troops. And should any act of mine break my word, or should the tiniest hint of suspicion fall upon me…my life is yours to dispose of as you see fit.”

“If he goes any lower, he’ll need to start digging his own grave.” Shuten noted, slightly in disbelief.

“I don’t care if you kill me!” Everyone started at this admission.

“Why?” Yona’s voice, although quiet, riveted attention to her, and only Tae-Jun’s belief that he was too sinful to look upon her again kept his head down. “You harmed the city of Fuuga and its citizens, and attempted to kill Hak, my Guard and Consort. Why are you saying this now?”

Hiryuu’s dragons were reminded of him in how Yona held herself, the tone of how she spoke to Tae-Jun. “Raise your head. Look me in the eye when you answer me.” She commanded quietly.

Her composure broke when he did raise his head, but he was crying too much to notice. “Please forgive my indolence, but my vision is too blurry to actually see Hime-sama’s eyes.” He apologized, using language more formal than she could ever recall him using before, even when pressing his attentions on her. “Truthfully…I have no idea why I am saying any of this. It’s so confusing! But…I’m supremely grateful, that someone as sinful as myself…has been given a chance to speak to you one more time. I don’t know what to do! It’s a blessing I never dreamed of, but…thank you! Thank you for being alive still!”

“…I’m thinking she didn’t burn him, so much as char him to ashes.” Guen commented with a sweatdrop, as Yona just started laughing.

“Hime-san…” Hak scolded with a sigh.

“Sorry Hak.” She apologized as she quieted her laughing, but was unable to suppress her smile. “Any complaints if I let him go?”

“Oh, I actually get a say?” Hak retorted sarcastically.

“Tae-Jun, I release you.” Everyone but Hak and Zeno stared at her in disbelief.
Yona turned to look at the torches in the distance. “Your troops are already in sight, and will harm the villagers at this rate. Should that happen, we will crush them without mercy. As their commander, their fate is your fate. Should you break your word, and any villager comes to harm…I will kill you myself.” She vowed, turning back to look at Tae-Jun. “If it is a commitment you can accept, then go. Do everything in your power to stop them, and demonstrate that any trust I have in your good faith is not misplaced.”

Tae-Jun’s heart started beating fast, even faster than if she had blessed him with a smile. Bowing, he took off running towards his troops as the fire arrows were prepared.

“So what is up with him?” Hak asked Yona, after everything calmed down and the torches on the horizon vanished. “I didn’t think he was that serious in his affection for you.”

“I think my fire burned him.” She replied quietly. “I was really pissed off, and really determined when I shoved that archer off and confronted him. That’s the only thing that makes sense, combined with thinking I died. I imagine his brother was getting fed up with him, and sent him here to try and do something useful.”

“It seems to have been less of a burn, and more of a charring.” Abi commented.

“I’m just wondering when he’ll realize you named me as your Consort.” Hak wondered.

“…I might need to tell him again. And again. Before it sinks through.” She said after some thought.

“So how, Hak-sama is reminding me of a cat, playing with his prey,” Kaya commented to Zeno, curled up in his lap watching as Hak snuck up on Tae-Jun.

Zeno just nodded as Tae-Jun freaked out upon seeing Hak behind him. “Am I dreaming? It seems like a certain second son who was causing a lot has come back.” Hak said, rubbing his eyes as Tae-Jun huddled by a tree.

“Y-you’ve got the wrong person.” Tae-Jun screamed when Hak dove his blade into the tree, a hair’s breadth shy of his face. “Oh? You’re just some random guy, lurking around? Die.” Hak growled.

“Wait! I am Kan Tae-Jun!”

“So you’re really suspicious. Die.” The lingering fire had left Hak on edge, to the point where he hadn’t sleeping well, despite Yona doing her best to wear him out.

“Hold it, I die either way?!!” Kaya muffled giggles in her hands and Zeno grinned broadly. “Mister is having fun!”

“Ah…I wanted to see Yona-hime-sama. Is…is she here?”

Crickets chirped.

“I didn’t tell any officials where I was going.”

More chirping crickets.

“Say something already Hak!” Tae-Jun growled, unnerved by his silence.

“…I had three dreams where you ‘accidently’ broke your word. I wanted to kill you.” Hak was
disturbed from terrorizing Tae-Jun further by the appearance of Yona and Kija.

Tae-Jun just twiddled his fingers, blushing as Hak took the food bundle. “I… I came to… to offer you some… refreshments…” He managed to get out as Hak opened the bundle and gave Kija a bite. “Well?” He asked as Kija chewed.

“Quite tasty; lightly seasoned yet deeply flavorful. Something spring-like about it.” Kija declared.

“Fine; you can eat it, Hime-san.” Hak decided, passing her the boxes.

“YOU WERE CHECKING FOR POISON?!?!?” Kija screeched, as Yona called the villagers over.

“Y-Yona-hime-sama, I had intended—“

“No one’s had very much, if anything, since this morning or last night, so this is a huge help. Thank you!” She remarked, smiling as she thanked him.

Tae-Jun was distracted from twirling for joy when he saw just how the villagers devoured his meager offerings. *They really don’t have enough food… “Hime-sama, you’re not eating a lot, are you?”* He asked. *She seems thinner, compared to that day…*

“I’ve had a lifetime’s worth of luxury, growing up, so I have plenty of energy.” She assured him. Considering the food boxes in her hands, she continued. “I always knew Father had been lying to me, when he said that everyone in Kouka was happy and had enough to eat. It’s why… I ordered all the leftover food from meals to be handed out among the poor in Kuuto. And yet, despite knowing that… there was still so much I wasted. If I could turn back time, and retrieve all of those things and bring them here, could things be more like how Father wanted them to be?”

Tae-Jun couldn’t help but be entranced as the wind picked up, and her bangs waved in the wind. “I have gained small victories, for every time even a single person does not go to bed hungry again… but it’s not that easy, to change the root of the problem. That will take a victory larger than all of my small ones combined.”

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“He’s bringing food? That he stole from his own barracks?” Hak repeated what Shin-ah had told him in disbelief. “We’re sure that this IS Kan Tae-Jun, right? The guy who only seemed to see you as a trophy, with the throne as the prize?” He questioned Yona.

“It’s him.” She told him. “Sometimes, all it takes for a person to change to see how things really are. If he is, in fact, changing. He could backslide. Somehow, I get the feeling he could be a big help, if he can change. We can’t stay in Fire forever.” She admitted. “Yun has mentioned leaving, to look for a crop that can grow even in poor soil conditions.”

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“New friend?” Jaeha asked Kija, snacking on a tangerine.

“No way! He’s the son of the Fire Tribe General! Normally he’d be an enemy!” Tae-Jun looked put out at being called an enemy, but then Yona walked by with a basket of laundry.

“I’m not thrilled by his presence, and when I see him like that—“ Kija pointed to a blushed Tae-Jun as he watched Yona. “—I can’t help feeling suspicious.”

_He probably sympathizes with him._ Jaeha reflected. “So is he why Hak was so worked up the other night? I was nowhere near here, but even I felt that dark fire.” He quietly asked Kija and Zeno.
“Mister really doesn’t like him.” Zeno remarked. “Ginger Broth Guy had been bothering the Miss and trying to get her affections around the time Mister became Miss’s guard. The late King even had to stop him from drawing his sword.”

“Oh?” Jaeha smirked darkly in Tae-Jun’s direction. “So he is not to be left alone with Yona-chan.”

Tae-Jun shivered, but ignored it, since he was always shivering here.

“I can’t help seeing him as hindering Hime-sama, even if for some reason she doesn’t object to his presence.” Kija remarked, as Tae-Jun fainted away in bliss after Yona shared a piece of the chestnut manju he had brought specifically for her.

“…I can’t help seeing a resemblance.” Jaeha muttered with a sweatdrop, idly dodging a swipe from Kija’s claws as he went to get his latest assignment from Yun.

Zeno looked to where Shin-ah was sitting, concealed from Tae-Jun as the village children played with Ao. They exchanged nods.

Kan Tae-Jun was potentially a good ally for the future, but if he tried anything…

“What kind of work should they be doing?” Yun asked Tae-Jun, after he complained that it was the villagers’ own fault for not being able to pay taxes.

“…growing and selling rice and vegetables.”

With a sigh, Yun jabbed a finger at the fields. “Look. That land is exhausted. It would take years of careful attention by many strong workers to keep it irrigated while it recovers enough to support any kind of crops. Most of the land is like that here. But with only women, children, and old men here, it can’t happen.”

“Right, I haven’t seen any young men. Where are they?”

Guen, taking his turn at stalk Tae-Jun duty, just facepalmed as Yun gaped at him. “Where—your father, Kan Su-jin, ordered a conscription of all young, healthy men in Fire, as troops! That’s where they are! Even if a third desert, there’s no real work they can take on here, so they turn to banditry or flee to another Tribe’s lands! The few who can bribe the officials are in a position where they don’t need to work to start with! “ Yun explained with a glare.

“It can’t be helped. Everyone in Fire is subject to Father’s orders.” Tae-Jun reminded Yun.

“…just whose side are you on?” Yun complained. “Yona is a bandit who’s claimed this area for herself.”

“I’d vastly prefer for her to stop this charade, and cut her ties to people like you. I’ll find her a safe place to live.” Tae-Jun said with a glare, not intimidated by Yun.

“Listen! Yona—“ He was cut off when Yona crouched down and tapped his shoulder. “If you raise your voice, you’ll alarm everyone.” She gently reminded him.

“…right, sorry.” Yun apologized. “But this guy has no clue about anything!”

Before Tae-Jun could get worked up, Yona distracted him. “I’m going to check up on the villagers. Would you like to come with me?”

She wasn’t blind to how all of her dragons were keeping an eye on Tae-Jun. How did he get through
any sort of training if he hasn't noticed them following us? She wondered. It's not like they’re being overly stealthy...

With a mental sigh, she set off on her rounds, Tae-Jun trailed behind like a puppy, with Hak, Jaeha, and Kija ‘discreetly’ following behind.

Chapter End Notes

I just noticed, flipping back through volume 10, that even Ao is taken aback by Tae-Jun’s sobbing face. For real; she’s not smiling!

I’m thinking part of the reason for Tae-Jun’s state, if not most of it, was because he was at the focus of her fire when it lit, in series. He did mention everything being the color of ashes. In my story, she was just epically pissed off.
Serious Question

Serious question time!

I was reading a summary of what’s to come involving Kan Su-jin, and I read that Yona does confront him. So I’m wondering everyone’s thoughts on having her kill him, and possibly reveal herself as Hiruyu’s reincarnation at least to Jaeha and Kija (well, more like confirm it). I’m pretty sure him calling himself Hiryyou-ou will not go over well. I’ll need to check if she runs into Su-won before or after the encounter with Kan Su-jin (or at all). I don’t want to go too far away from canon, but it might be time for the ripple effect to start becoming obvious. If I do go that route, then the reveal of the Monkeys will be at the Zeno reveal. About the only thing up in the air is when I have Yona reveal herself to Jaeha and Kija, given how she hasn’t been comfortable revealing it to them before.

So, what I’m asking is this: Have Yona kill Kan Su-jin herself and reveal her knowledge of her previous life to Jaeha and Kija (while generating rumors among any troops who might witness it)? Or have Kan Su-jin meet his canon fate, and have Yona’s reveal during Zeno’s questioning after the reveal of his power, when he reveals he had served Hiryyou-ou?

I personally could go either way, but having read about that encounter, it might work better if it’s the first option. Please weigh in on this in the comments. I still have the hunt for the Iza seeds to do, so you have until those chapters are finished to give your opinions. I don’t know how long writing those will take, but at least a few weeks. So by the end of April, and I’ll confirm what I’ll be doing then.

April 30: Survey says have Yona kill Kan Su-jin. Wonder if it's as much because it hasn't been seen in fanfiction as much because of the awesome factor.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a strange procession that went through the village. Yona with a love-sick, blushing, Tae-Jun at her heels, with Hak, Jaeha, and Kija ‘stealthy’ trailing behind. “I’m glad the messenger bird from Kija’s village is long gone, or I wouldn’t have chanced it.” She remarked, handing Se-dol the bird she had just shot down.

“You’ve gotten really good at this.” Se-dol praised as he accepted it.

Hak couldn’t contain his smug smirk at the impressed look on Tae-Jun’s face.

“You asked why they don’t work earlier. But gathering what food they can, and raising the children, is their work. We’ve been helping them do that, but as it stands, they can’t save any money, or pay taxes. Unfortunately, there’s only so much we can do.” She explained, peeking into Mee-Lei’s hut.

“Auntie Mee-Lei? How are you doing today?”

“Not good. My joints ache and it’s cold in here.” Mee-Lei replied.

“It’s probably this crack; I’ll patch it.”

“Just be snappy. And who’s this bland-looking guy?” She asked, eyeing Tae-Jun. “Where’s your sexy fellow?”

“I think Yun has Hak doing something for him at the moment.” Yona commented as she dug out what she needed to patch the crack. “I’ll send him over once Yun’s done with him.”

Focusing on the dark fire, she sent the impression of a raised eyebrow, and so just barely caught Tae-Jun revealing himself. Bringing a finger to her lips, she reminded him that by all rights, he wasn’t actually here, before turning to her task. “If you’re not doing anything then rub my shoulders.” Mee-Lei ordered.

What followed was an exercise in pain for Tae-Jun, his every effort not to Mee-Lei’s satisfaction. “Go get that other sexy fellow; no one said they wanted you here anyway.” She said with a glare.

Yona just mentally sighed as Tae-Jun started off complaining. But this isn’t Saika… She just looked at him over her shoulder, managing to silence him before returning to her hammering. She was pretty sure he caught her point as Hak entered and started massaging Mee-Lei’s shoulders. “I heard I had an appointment.” He told a put-out Tae-Jun. “So just run on home, since this is clearly beyond you.”

“I-I was about to do it!” Tae-Jun protested.

“Dismissed.” Mee-Lei said curtly. “Ahhh…you’re good at this. If I was a couple decades younger…” She said with a relaxed sigh.

“Gramps always had me massage him, so I know how to handle the elderly.”

“DON’T TREAT ME LIKE I’M ELDERLY!!!” Mee-Lei screamed, hitting both Hak and Tae-Jun.

“Why’d I get hit this time?!” Tae-Jun complained, as Yona, finished patching the crack, crouched by Hak. “Really Hak; women want people they like to see them as eternally young.” She chided.
“Does that go for you too? Even when you’re as wrinkly as a prune and have hair that matches 
White Snake’s?” Hak asked with a smirk, and to Tae-Jun, it was like there was something in the air.

“If my hair manages to turn white.” She retorted with a smirk. “Your hair is more likely to match 
Kija’s one day then mine.”

Hak grimaced. “I’ll take care of this Hak; so get out!” Tae-Jun opened the door, catching sight of 
Heuk Chi.

He slammed the door shut. “It’s Heuk Chi! If-if he realizes I’m here, and have been taking food from 
the barracks—“

“Oh, a thief? Time to turn him in.” Hak grabbed Tae-Jun’s shoulder, ready to throw him out.

Suddenly, the pair of them and Yona were shoved under a ragged quilt. “Quiet.” Mee-Lei hissed.

“Go hide in a closet, Hak!” Tae-Jun whispered harshly.

“Well you should be hiding in a pot, Tae-Jun-sama.” Hak replied mockingly, as Yona managed to 
elbow both of them into silence as the door creaked open.

Tension covered the trio (and Ao) much like the quilt, as Mee-Lei bluffed the soldiers out of her 
home. “Kija and Jaeha aren’t here; I hope they don’t try anything.” Yona whispered, as the soldiers 
left and they waiting for Mee-Lei to let them out.

“If they cross a line, I’m send them flying.” Hak muttered in reply.

Finally, Mee-Lei let them out, and somehow Tae-Jun mustered up a sincere apology. “Ah, ma’am? 
Thank you…for protecting me today. The next time I come…I’ll massage your shoulders.”

She gave him a cross between a smile and a smirk. “Pass. I’d rather have that sexy fellow’s hands on 
me.”

“Wha-?” Yona hauled him out by his arm.

“That’s the best mood I’ve seen her in.” She remarked as they left.

“That was a GOOD mood!!” Tae-Jun asked, stunned.

“Auntie Mee-Lei doesn’t like showing her emotions, so she always says mean things. But I think she 
liked you, Tae-Jun.”

“…if that’s her liking me, I don’t want to see what would happen if she hated me.” Tae-Jun 
commented, rubbing the collection of bumps on his head.

“Her son was conscripted and taken to Saika ten years ago. She hasn’t been very happy since.” 
Yona explained with a sad smile. “She’s said that if she could use her legs, she’d go to Saika and 
cllobber her ungrateful son. She…doesn’t let herself cry in front of anyone.”

“Yona, don’t push it.” Yun cautioned. “There’s still a little room in the cart, so you don’t have to 
carry that much.”

“Don’t waste your breath, Yun. Hime-san’s too stubborn to give up, even if she’s shaking more than 
a newborn fawn.” Hak commented, balancing two huge buckets of water on the shaft of his weapon.
“Shut up Hak.”

“Hime-sama, allow me—“

“I need to build up strength, if I ever want to manage a full-size sword someday.” Yona reminded him, gritting her teeth. “We need as much water as all of us can carry anyway.”

“What’s that screeching?” Kija wondered as a breathless Tae-Jun rode up, screaming ‘Yona-hime-sama’.

“Good, we can pull him off and use the horse.” Hak ordered.

“May we borrow your horse for a bit?” Yona asked politely, even as Yun and Hak hitched up the cart to the horse.

“O-of course, Yona-hime-sama!” Tae-Jun consented with a blush, much to Kija and Hak’s displeasure. “Why do you need this much water, anyway?”

“You’ll see once we get there.”

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How can things have gotten this bad? Tae-Jun wondered as he stared in disbelief at the squalid village. And I thought Katan Village was bad; houses falling down, vacant eyes, the smell…

His disbelief turned to shock as he watched Yona help a man who smelled more dead than alive drink water. “Let me boil some water, and we can get you cleaned up.” She told the man with a gentle smile and sad eyes.

“Villages like this are becoming more common in Fire.” Yun remarked, cooking up soup.

It was thinner than he wanted it to be, but with not knowing how long it had been since anyone here had last eaten anything substantial, he had to err on the side of caution, and try not to push their stomachs. “No clean water, disease everywhere…these areas are easy pickings for bandits, so every home has been ransacked at least once, no matter how meager the contents are. The government officials have pretty much written places like this off, so they don’t bother checking in, let alone try to get any taxes out of people. Law and order are distant memories, so merchants can’t travel everywhere they might want to go.”

“Is it really safe for Yona-hime-sama to be in a place like this?” Tae-Jun, eyeing the surroundings, asked.

“I tell her to be more careful, but she doesn’t listen.” Yun admitted with a sigh.

“Doesn’t she realize the danger?!?” Tae-Jun exclaimed.

“She understands the danger perfectly; but that won’t stop her.” Hak cut in.

Tae-Jun couldn’t avoid noticing the fond smile as Hak watched Yona wash the man earlier, managing to draw smiles and even laughter from him as she chattered at him, relating how Kija reacted when he first encountered bugs. “She wants to make the Kouka that King Il dreamed of a reality. She was smart enough, to know things were not as he had told her, but seeing something is a lot different from knowing about it. She’s trying to make up for all the things she didn’t do as Princess.”
“I’m seeing it, but I still don’t believe it.” Hak said, peeking out at as Tae-Jun told his troops the village would be the new headquarters, pointing out that someplace lawless was the perfect place for such a headquarters. “I mean, even if Yun couched him on what to say…” His expression matched that of his soldiers as he declared that improvements would have to be made, so they didn’t get the illness afflicting the village, and setting up patrols.

“I’m thinking this will be the deciding event, how things go when it doesn’t go exactly to plan.” Abi remarked.

“Damnit, why couldn’t he just stay pathetic?” Hak complained as he ducked out of town.

“I’m seeing it, but I just can’t believe it.” Yun said, watching Zeno disguise himself perfectly as a laborer, to aid in the building of the headquarters so they could have a secret way in.

“If you can manage to pass unnoticed and not tip anyone off for a whole day, why the hell don’t you normally do so?” He asked as Zeno shed the disguise that evening.

Zeno blinked at him. “Why would Zeno do that? It’s more fun to stand out!”

Yun didn’t even bother containing his face palm.

Jaeha, stuck as the ferry boat for Yun, listened to the chatter of the soldiers after one of their number collapsed, and Tae-Jun began running around tending to him. “Huh; I’d have pegged him as just another idiot noble. I could never imagine him turning into someone who could inspire other people.”

“Sometimes, the most unexpected people can surprise you.” His ancestor remarked.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than haunt me?” Jaeha complained.

“Haunting the clan is too boring, since everyone is too stubborn to get the message. And it’s not like Heaven is that exciting.” His ancestor retorted.

Rolling his eyes, Jaeha had to remind himself that kicking the ghost would not actually do anything.

Yun managed to not betray his shock when Tae-Jun broke down crying at being praised for his work, even if he wasn’t sure if it was because of the praise or the relief that his subordinate would be fine. “You did hear me when I said he’d be fine, right? You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I’m surprised, at how much nicer the village looks since you’ve come here. And at how you’ve looked after this man…it isn’t something we could have done without you.” Yona told Tae-Jun as Yun was lifted back up into the crawl space in the ceiling.

“I…I almost ran away many times…” He admitted, shame-faced.

“You know, courage isn’t about not being afraid. It’s about doing what needs to be done, in spite of any fear you feel.” She remarked gently. “Back then, when you were after Hak and me…no matter what was happening to your troops, you just smiled like it meant nothing. I hated that. But you’ve changed a lot now. The you back then, in the cliffs, and who demanded my attention, wouldn’t recognize you as himself. I’m glad that I’ve gotten to meet this new you.” She commented, wiping away a tear at the corner of his eye.
“Hime-san, time to go.” Hak called, lowering the rope for her to grab and be hauled back up.

“Huh?” Tae-Jun started out of his daze after she was safely in the ceiling. “Did she—“

Hak hit him with the rope. “Nope. Stop fantasizing about my betrothed.” Hak scolded. “And open your door, idiot.”

“’Idiot’?” Tae-Jun repeated with a grimace. “Wait; ‘betrothed’?!”

Rolling his eyes, Hak tossed a small piece of wood at his head. “Yes; betrothed. Now open up your door before they get desperate enough to break it down.”

“Tae-Jun-sama…have you been doing ‘recon’ so you could seduce this girl?” Heuk-Chi asked flatly. He had some suspicions, but without any proof…

“Huh?!” Tae-Jun exclaimed.

“I’m a pretty boy, thank you very much.” Yun said flatly.

“A boy? I can be flexible.” One of the troops remarked. “Will you teach us how to make medicine later?”

“Uh, sure…” Yun eyed the soldier, considering. “I thought you officials would be scarier. Guess no one is completely evil.”

“EH?!” He protested, disappointed at being call ‘scary’ while his fellows laughed. “Your face is what’s scary!”

“Yeah right you brute!”

“Amazing…” Tae-Jun said in awe, after watching the boy who insisted on calling him ‘Ginger Broth Guy’ pull the old man out of his stupor and get him smiling.

“Not really.” Zeno countered. “People are mirrors. When you smile, you get a smile reflected back.”

“Wait, now I’m learning stuff from a kid?” Then again, Yona-hime-sama seems to be attracting such people to her…”Yona-hime-sama trusts people like you, and keeps them with her…” He commented quietly.

Zeno smiled. “You’ve got a good expression about you. And everyone around you—“ He gestured to the soldiers, tackling their tasks with smiles and good humor. “—is mirroring it. Zeno thinks that you’ll be someone important in Kouka one day.”

Tae-Jun stared at him, startled. Important? Me? “Important how?”

“No clue!” Zeno admitted cheerfully.

“I don’t need to be someone important.” Tae-Jun said, surprising Zeno a bit. “As long as she—“

“Mealtime!!!”

Reactions to Yun’s cooking were predictable. “MARRY ME!!!!” The soldier who said he could be
flexible cried.

“Hands to yourselves…” Yun said, expertly dodging reaching hands.

With Zeno entertaining everyone with his juggling, somehow able to juggle and dance at the same time, it was a better evening than most could recall having in a long time.

Even Tae-Jun, growing up with high-brow entertainment, found more enjoyment in Zeno’s act then he had ever found in the priciest dancers.

Clapping, a villager began to sing Fire’s traditional song, everyone else soon joining.

“Long, long ago
When the crimson sun was devoured,
And darkness fell on the earth,
The Four Dragons called to one another, and bowed their heads
They bowed their head to the Fire Dragon”

“’The God of Fire’.…” Yun remarked.

“I haven’t hear it in years. I used to sing it all the time, and annoy my brother with my singing.” Tae-Jun reminisced.

“I imagine the other Tribes think it’s a pretty arrogant song, singing about how the Fire Tribe is descended from Hiryuu-ou.” Yun commented.

“Father would always say that our Tribe was descended from Hiryuu-ou. I was so proud of that.” Tae-Jun said quietly. He wanted to reclaim Hiryuu Castle because of that. But…now I’m not sure what Father talked about was what Hiryuu-ou really stood for.

He was a king, and a dragon god, but he loved all people, and was loved by his Dragon Warriors. The goal he fought for, and the world he envisioned… I don’t think it was a castle or a throne; nothing that grand, but one more meaningful…

“It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?”

…he dreamed of something a lot like what she dreams of… “Hime-sama! You really shouldn’t be—“

“I know; so don’t turn around, just listen.” Yona told him. “I’ve come to say good-bye. Yun wants to go in search of a crop that will thrive here, and we’ll be going with him.”

“You’ll…you’ll come back, right?” As undeserving as he was of the miracle that was her survival, he still didn’t want it to end.

“Yes. And…Auntie Mee-Lei passed away this morning.”

“…what?” He breathed, remembering that fierce, proud woman.

“She’d been ill for a long time.” She added quietly.

“…I had been thinking, that when I returned to Saika, I’d look for her son. Someday…” But ‘someday’ will never come…

‘Someday’ is too late.

“None of us can be certain about seeing anyone again. Still…there are still many people who need
support, here in Fire. Can I entrust this task to you, Kan Tae-Jun? Will you protect everyone in the Fire Tribe, and care for the smoldering embers until they can blaze back to life in all their glory?"

Hak, a discreet distance away, felt the fire throbbing in and between both of them as she asked this of Tae-Jun, and he knew she had that face; the one that was breathtaking and showed the King she had been, and the King she would be again.

Tae-Jun bowed low. “For one such as myself to be entrusted with such a duty, there is no greater honor!” He declared as he accepted her task. “I...will await your safe return…”

Heuk Chi peeked in at a sleeping Tae-Jun. “It’s hard to believe that spoilt, worthless second son could ever amount to anything, let alone develop a drive to help those far below him.” He commented to himself.

Shutting the door gently, he went to the small, traveling altar Tae-Jun had prayed at for Yona-hime-sama’s soul, and where he had continued burning incense as his charge found a renewed interest in life. “Maybe a ghost from the beyond showed him the path through the ashes.” He remarked, lighting a fresh stick. “It was said the Fire Dragon liked wisteria scent for some reason…”

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter I’m not completely happy with, but since volume ten is very Tae-Jun focused anyway, I focused on snapshots of the Happy Hungry Bunch's reaction to his growth.

Got my first negative comments for this; well comment, since whomever the person was pissed enough to run out of room and had to continue his/her rant in a second comment. If anyone cares to wade through the poor typing, they’re on chapter 12 I believe. I offered to answer the complaints point-by-point if they fixed the typing, but I don't think that will happen. From what I understood, the complaint was how this is nothing like the series.
“I’ve received a letter from Hakuryuu-sama.” Baa-Baa told Headman Abi. “Would you like to hear what he wrote?”

He nodded.

---

Dear Baa-Baa,

Hime-sama has decided we are to act as bandits here in Fire, to protect villages from officials seeking exorbitant taxes. I don’t understand how a lord could put his military before his people! There are no young men to work the fields and help them recover from the drought, as they are all conscripted, even with a fair number deserting and becoming bandits, according to Zeno.

Shin-ah used his power the other day. Bandits attacked when it was just him and Hime-sama, and his sword had been stolen by one of the village children. I understand now why his clan fear the Dragon’s Eyes so much; from what I could tell, it can selectively paralyze parts of the body, not just the heart or the whole body. The rage I felt from him as we rushed back to help was surprising, and undoubtedly fueled him, since the bandits had very dishonorable intentions towards Hime-sama. I doubt its use was anything other than a last resort, being weaponless and getting stabbed by one of the bandits.

Do the records mention anything about a penalty for using the power of Seiryuu? Once Hime-sama had assured him of her safety, Shin-ah collapsed, paralyzed. It took a day for the paralysis to lift even partially, and nearly three before he could move freely again (not that Yun was willing to let him move freely, with his injury).

Ouryuu Zeno continually frustrates me, as he spends more time hiding than fighting. He is as devoted to Hime-sama as the rest of us, that I do not doubt, but in light of the penalty for the use of the Dragon’s Eyes, and Hime-sama’s reaction when I pressed Zeno about it, makes me think there’s a penalty for the use of his power. Zeno himself implied that it is for when the other Dragons are not enough. Yun thinks it might be some kind of super-healing, but…I’m still curious. Not as curious as Ryokuryuu Jaeha is about Shin-ah’s eyes.

Hak’s strength has grown since becoming Hime-sama’s consort. He was already extremely strong for a regular human, but now his strength nigh well equals that of my Dragon’s Arm.

Shin-ah, while surprised, was grateful for your offer of refuge to his clan, and pleased they accepted, despite their fears.

While we are acting as bandits presently, I do not think we will be here much longer; Yun has heard rumors of a crop that can grow even in poor soil conditions. Hopefully such a thing does exist, so there can be a long-term solution to the problems in Fire.

Best wishes to everyone’s health.

All my love,

Kija
Baa-Baa subtly eyed Headman Abi as she read the letter. “…why would he care about our safety? In light of…” He wondered to himself.

“From what Hakuryuu-sama has written previously, Seiryuu-sama, Shin-ah, is very kind hearted, looking out for all of them.” She told him. “While he does not speak very much to any of them, beyond Yona-hime-sama, he doesn’t need words to show his kindness.”

*My son had been bitter about his fate, even as he defended all of us. My grandson seems to have taken the opposite path.* He reflected. “’Moonlight’…it suits him.” He remarked quietly to Baa-Baa.

“How has your clan been adjusting?” She asked.

“It is mostly the ones of an age to potentially produce the next Seiryuu who are having the most trouble. The children are enjoying the sun and nature too much, and those past the age of having children have evidently decided it is was not worth the effort to make any fuss over it.” He answered.

“Our records are few from that time, let alone regarding the other Dragons once they scattered, but the first Hakuryuu-sama lived twenty years past the death of Hiryuu-ou-sama, and he was the first of them to die. If the cycle does continue, the next generation will likely not be born until late in Yona-hime-sama’s life, if not after her death. Perhaps this knowledge will help ease their concerns?” Baa-Baa proposed.

“It is hard to say if it will or not, but it cannot hurt to tell them.” He conceded. “You never did answer why the Dragon Villages did not keep in contact with each other.”

“…I imagine the first generation would have kept some contact amongst themselves, having served Hiryuu-ou-sama together, but as each new generation of dragons was born, and Ryokuryuu and Seiryuu Villages suffered upheavals…Our records do not really say why. The last recorded encounter was when they left Hiryuu Castle and scattered.” She answered, thinking back over the stories she remembered. “As I said previously, if we had known of how you had lost your heritage…”

“What of Ryokuryuu Village?” He asked, curious.

“We know of their general location, but they are as hostile to strangers approaching as we are, so we do not have much knowledge about them. The current Ryokuryuu, Jaeha, was in the port of Awa, and given what Hakuryuu-sama has written of his scorn for the dragon’s legacy…” She shrugged. “We will just have to wait and see if Yona-hime-sama’s travels lead her to Ryokuryuu Village.”

Su-won frowned down at Yona’s book. After Hiryuu-ou’s coronation, it seemed to devolve into pieces, with blank pages in between. Like she didn’t know all the details. “Hadn’t come up with the details Su-won.” He reminded himself.

Preparing his ink, he began.

*Thankfully, the meeting went smoothly. Assigned seating proved to be the key in ensuring a relatively calm meeting, as well as seating everyone in a circle, even if the question of who got to sit closest to him had been a thorny one.*

*After it ended, most everyone left, leaving only himself and his mother’s uncle, Tae-u. Nearly seventy and in poor health, he was shocked he had made the journey from the northeastern province of Katan. “I am pleased to see your health was able to permit you to make the journey.” He said*
formally.

“Standing on ceremony now?” Tae-u asked with a raised eyebrow. “Nephew.”

“...Zheng mocked the idea of me being his cousin, just because we do not share a bloodline. I...am unsure about where I stand with most everyone now.” He admitted quietly.

“He...he implied Mother had betrayed the marriage bed, Uncle.”

“Yuhon’s branch of Il’s family have never been known for tact, once they stop playing at niceties.” Tae-u commented. “But your ascension is not the only reason I have come.”

Hiryuu blinked, unsure where this was going.

“I have no children. A most unfortunate injury in my youth gelded me before I ever had the chance. Cheonsa was my brother’s only surviving child, much as he was my only surviving sibling. Adopted or not, as her child you are my closest relative to whom I can pass Katan onto.” Tae-u stated. “My generation containing two sons was abnormal for my family, as we tend towards daughters. The tradition of inheritance in Katan dictates that it pass to the closest male relative of the current lord. Which is you.”

“You don’t have long left, do you?” He commented quietly. Tae-u’s Spark was tainted with encroaching blackness, symbolizing the creeping illness that slowly robbed him of life.

“I never expected to last as long as I have.” Tae-u reflected. “After watching from afar the anguish your parents went through, trying to bring a natural born heir into the world, and the happiness you brought them...it may not be by blood, but I see them in you. Il did not have the necessary military skill to pull off his impossible dream of uniting most of the peninsula. It remains to be seen if you have more military skill then he did, but just going off your handling of the meeting, it looks like you have some measure of his people skills, yet not an excess of his trusting nature.”

“Like I said, recent events have left me unsure about where I stand with people. Will there be any problems, passing Katan to me?” Hiryuu asked.

“Even if by some miracle one of the female cousins managed to bear a son tomorrow, the relation is too far away from me for inheritance to permit it. My councilors are savvy enough to realize that acknowledging you as my successor was a far better option for their futures than letting Katan fall into civil war.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Guen deadpanned, taking in eighteen year old Hiryuu dressed in plain yet serviceable clothes, with a rucksack and a cloak to cover his hair. “What the hell are you planning, and how can I talk you out of it?”

“Can’t you go by horse or carriage? You’re the King; you don’t have to walk.” Guen pointed out.

“A horse or carriage would mark me as high status, and I don’t want a polished view. Before, when I would come and observe things on Earth, the people with high status might have had the best smelling food and the highest quality clothes, but the ‘low’ status people were the ones who always interested me more. Plus, just off of what I saw, you can get a good indicator of the character of someone ‘high’ status by seeing how they treat those they see as below them.” Hiryuu explained. “And I want to see the other provinces, and maybe figure out if I can get them to join peacefully.”

“Like hell are you going alone.” Guen declared, stalking off to get a rucksack and cloak of his own.
Fifteen minutes later, after last-minute fussing from Yun-an, various bits of advice from Mun, directions to the councilors, and requests to bring back gifts from Yun-mei, they were able to set out. “I guess this makes us The Two Traveling Warriors.” Hiryuu said with a smile.

Guen just facepalmed. “This is not going to end well.”

“Guen…what exactly just happened?” Hiryuu asked, blinking at the…stuff…the priests of the Shrine of the Crimson Dragon God had pressed into his arms. It looked to mostly be deeds and texts of some kind.

His arrival had generated a frenzy of priests and monks prostrating themselves to him, the visitors following their lead mostly out of confusion. Then the priests and monks began ushering the visitors out, and only his tentative, “I don’t intend to disturb everyone…” had stopped them.

“Ryuujin-sama, as your shrine, all of our holdings, buildings, and attendants are at your disposal.” The chief priest, magenta eyes marking him as an oracle, explained with a low bow. “That is all of the relevant documents concerning us.”

“…I simply wanted to visit the shrine, as I had no clue of its existence before I descended.” He explained, a little sheepishly. “I’m not sure what I could do with a shrine…”

“There are important events to come that will take place in this area…and it is not a shrine that occupies this area when it happens.” The oracle explained. “Our central location will be useful in your quest to unite the provinces.”

“Some remnant of the shrine will remain when I do build a castle here. All of the people who live here have more right to its use then me, and I will not cast any of them out.” He assured him, drawing a surprised, yet pleased smile from the oracle.

“Oww…” He complained, being carried piggy back by Guen, his right ankle nearly double the usual size after landing badly when the road gave way from the recent heavy rains.

“You don’t complain when you get slashed, but a twisted ankle gets complaints?” Guen remarked deadpan. “And isn’t ‘oww’ an immature for someone your age?”

“Those mostly just itch. It’s not like twenty two is that old, old man.”

“Call me that again and I’m dropping you. We have to be getting close to a compound, given the increasingly maintained nature of the road.” Guen said, and soon they were within sight of a fairly large compound.

They were reluctantly permitted entrance, both being covered in mud. Led into a courtyard, the apparent owner of the compound, a heavy-set middle aged man, scarcely gave them a glance.

“They are not to receive lodging here. Abi, take them out.”

A younger man, about Hiryuu’s age with medium brown hair and pale blue eyes, bowed, murmuring, “Yes, Elder Brother.”

Guen opened his mouth, likely to protest or reveal who they were, but Hiryuu covered his mouth with his hand, and Guen felt more than saw the shake of his head.

The man, Abi, led them from the main house and to the gate. Instead of leaving them at the gate, he led them to a door in the wall that opened to reveal the interior of a small outbuilding. “Elder
Brother only said you weren’t to receive lodging ‘here’. He didn’t say you weren’t to receive lodging in the compound at all.” He explained. “Set him down and let me see his ankle.”

“Won’t you get in trouble?” Hiryuu asked, concerned.

Abi snorted. “As long as I follow the letter of whatever Father and Elder Brother order, they ignore me otherwise. Although,” His eyes flicked to a lock of hair that had escaped the hood of his cloak, crimson gleaming through the mud. “If you had revealed who you were, they would have bent over backwards to satisfy you. We may be somewhat isolated out here, but even we have heard of the crimson haired King who’s managed to bring three provinces into one principality without civil war breaking out.”

Hiryuu winced as Abi prodded his ankle. “If I wanted ceremony, I wouldn’t be traveling with only one other person and dressed below my ‘station’. Seeing how the great regard the small shows their character better than how they regard their equals.”

“The mud did not help.” Abi commented drily, rinsing the mud from his ankle to better examine it.

“It’s not like we told the road to give way underneath us.” Hiryuu muttered with a flush.

“Give way underneath you, Hiryuu-sama.” Guen reminded him. “Ma and Sis will whip your ass when we get back.”

“Unless you really want to carry him all the way back to Kuuto, you’ll be here a few days longer than you likely intended. Nothing feels broken, but until the current rains passed, it’s safer to stay put. The mud in this area is especially sticky, and trying to put any weight on this ankle will just make it worse.” Abi declared. “This building is mine, and neither of them ever come out here, and as long as I make a couple appearances throughout the day, they don’t question what I do.”

“I told you this was a bad idea.” Guen said to twenty five year old Hiryuu, as they stood back to back and surrounded by the very mercenaries they had come looking for. “If we die I’m killing you.”

“So these are the Two Traveling Idiots?” The apparent leader, a black haired man with purple eyes and resting a spear on his shoulder, commented as he walked up. “Never thought one of them would be the infamous Crimson King.”

Now that he was closer, he could see that his teeth had been filed into points, a hallmark of the fighting pits that flourished in the area between Xing and Kaze, in Silla. “I came to contract your group.” He said without preamble.

“…go on.” The leader said with narrowed eyes.

“Despite the gains I have made, uniting most of the provinces to the north of here, I don’t have that large an army. As the southern border is pretty quiet, I wish to contract you and your mercenaries to defend my southern border.” He explained.

“And what’s in it for us?”

“Food, shelters, and medical care in addition to your fee, for the entire group and its dependents.” He said.

The leader blinked, and Hiryuu got the impression he was caught off guard by his offer. “And what will you do should a better offer come along?” He countered.
“The food, shelters, and medical care are in addition to your fee, meaning I’m absorbing the costs. I can’t say just what I would do if you receive a better offer, as it would depend on whose offer you take in exchange to mine, but that part is without consequence.”

“So you’d pay for food, shelter, and medicines to the group out of the goodness of your heart, and not take it back no matter whose better offer we’d take? Didn’t think there was anyone that idiotic in the world.” The leader questioned with a snort.

“If the offer you take in place of mine comes from Yuhon of Chi, then I’ll be taking the fee back, with the interest in the blood of your fighters. I have no interest in killing innocents, but the fighters would be fair game.” Hiryuu stated with narrowed eyes.

The leader laughed. “You may be an idiot, but you’re a ballsy idiot, I’ll give you that.” With a jerk of his chin, the weapons pointing at Hiryuu and Guen were lowered. “We’ll hash out the fee over drinks.” He said as he turned to lead them to the camp.

“So what is your name?” Hiryuu asked as they entered the camp, surprisingly close to where they’d been surrounded.

Women and children peeked out from tents and lean tos. There several boars roasting over various fires. Everything was well organized, but he wasn’t sure they were getting all the kinds of food they needed, based on how everyone looked. The children and women looked to be in better condition than the fighters had.

“Shuten.” He answered, pulling out three bottles of alcohol strong enough to make Hiryuu feel dizzy just from the fumes.

“Oh!” Hiryuu exclaimed, blinking at the group of children of varying ages crowded around a fire. “We didn’t realize there were already people sheltering here.”

“It’s alright, there’s plenty of room for the two of you to stay as well.” The oldest of the children, who at a second glance proved to actually be a young adult, said as he tended the pot over the fire.

Hiryuu did a mental double take. The boy felt like his yellow brother, his hair a match for the color of his brother’s scales, and he had brown eyes. “Okay everyone, line up with your bowls.” He said.

The children did as requested, and the boy began ladling out something that smelled of ginger. “I was able to get some ginger for ginger broth, but nothing else. I’m sorry.” The boy apologized to them.

“Are you eating too, Zeno?” One of the smallest children, a girl of about five, asked.

“I’m fine.” Zeno assured her, despite the growls from his stomach. “I think there’s a couple extra bowls…” He trailed off, standing to go look for said bowls.

“We’re fine, we ate earlier.” Hiryuu said.

Guen sent him a look out of the corner of his eye, but he ignored him. “You guys are growing, so you need it more to grow up strong.”

It was then that Hiryuu’s stomach growled. He flushed, and mumbled, “It’s just thunder…” The children laughed.
All too soon the broth was consumed, and the children curled up for the night around the fire. Zeno stayed awake. “You didn’t eat earlier, did you?” He asked with a raised eyebrow.

“…no I didn’t. But I’ve got plenty of energy; I can skip a day.” He admitted. “So what was this place?”

“It had been a temple, but the trade routes shifted. There was only an old oracle still here when I found my way here, after plague came to my village. There were only like twenty people who survived, me included. We had to burn everything, to keep it from spreading. The old oracle died years ago, so I’ve been taking care of the orphans who wander around.” Zeno explained. “The farmer nearby give me food to bring back here if I come when their animals give birth, but winter lasted too long this year, so they haven’t had any extra.”

“I didn’t think there were this many orphans.” Guen marveled. “Where are they all coming from? We’ve been patrolling for bandits, and Kaze is friendly…”

“Mostly plague. While it’s not at famine level yet, harvests have been low for several years, meaning people aren’t eating as well as they should be, so they get sick easier.” Zeno answered.

“We’ll need to send people out; we’ve got the surplus food to spare, and Yuhon’s hasn’t made his move yet.” Hiryuu told Guen.

Zeno started rubbing his temples. “Are you okay?” Guen asked, concerned.

“I can hear the gods, and sometimes they get really loud. Nothing drives home the vast difference in time scales between humans and gods when the latest gossip from them is the Crimson Dragon God choosing to descend and live as a human, when that was twenty five years ago.” Zeno assured him, looking at Hiryuu as he said the last part.

“…I wish my hair didn’t stand out so much. But my brothers wouldn’t let me do this unless I kept my scale color as my hair color.” He explained, a little sheepish as he played with a lock of hair.

“Things aren’t great, but they have been better than before. People are still cautious, about whether or not the good times will last.” Zeno commented.

“Yuhon of Chi and his allies are my last opponents, to uniting most of the peninsula. Xing and Sei are too well established, so as long as I can make peace treaties with them, or at least non-aggression pacts…” Closing his eyes, it really felt to Hiryuu that his yellow brother was beside him. “One day, what will trouble people will be the vagaries of nature, and not the vagaries of man.” He promised Zeno.

“I wonder if these are the people who will become the Dragon Warriors.” Su-won wondered, stopping once he realized the moon was low in the sky, nearing dawn. “I wish she had come up with the details for how he united everyone…”

Chapter End Notes

Given the mass consensus for Yona killing Su-jin, I now have a spot for Su-won realizing the truth. Thus, the exploits of the Two Traveling Idiots/Warriors will be noodle incidents for now. It was more important to me to show Hiryuu meeting the
other Dragon Warriors, especially since the Dragon Gods' descent is something that's been written for months.
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Everyone was taken aback by Yona’s appearance when she and Hak had finished sword practice for the day.

She was covered in scratches and dirt and sweat.

He may or may not have had a few hairs out of place.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO HIME-SAMA?!!?” Kija screeched.

“Training, you know that.”

“But why is she so hurt?!”

“Miss got thrown back when she couldn’t block Mister’s strike. Almost go kicked, too.” Zeno said casually, making Kija pale.

“It’s better for me to get a little hurt here, in training, than severely hurt in battle.” Yona pointed out. “Even if Hak’s barely trying.”

“If I did actually try, I’d probably kill you.” He remarked, reaching for Kija’s bowl with Jaeha when this sent him into a faint.

Threat to his food brought a swift recovery, only for Kija to discover Ao filching.

“I might as well train as much as I can, while Yun plots where to go.” They had drifted north, into the mountain foothills.

“Sorry. I know where I want to end up, but getting there from here without drawing undue attention is a little tricky.” Yun apologized.

Finished with her share, Yona couldn’t contain her grimace as she ran a hand through her hair. “Do you want me to do anymore practice strokes, or is it safe to rinse off?” She asked Hak.

“Go ahead and rinse. You’ll be too stinky and sweaty to cuddle with otherwise.”

Yona dignified this with the mature response of sticking her tongue out as she grabbed her spare clothes.

“Will it help Yona if she eats this?” Shin-ah quietly asked Yun, referring to his share.

“She’ll be fine.” Yun assured him.

“Now Kija, you need to consider how difficult it is for Hak to strike at his beloved—“ Hak’s blade stopped inches from Jaeha’s nose. “Striking a nerve?” He asked casually.

Hak opted to go and follow Yona to the stream instead of dealing with Jaeha. “Oi, take this with you!” Yun called after him, tossing him a jar of salve.
Yona was already in the water when he arrived. It was cold, but it felt good against the scratches she became aware as the adrenaline faded.

Hak grimaced when he caught sight of just how many scratches were on her hand and legs. “If I had realized just how many scratches you were getting, I’d have stopped a little earlier.”

“I didn’t realize just how many scratches I had either. Not with how I’m hurting all over.” She admitted, leaving the water when the coldness got to be too much and she had rinsed her hair.

After she had dried off and dressed, she nearly melted into the ground as Hak began tending to her scratches, massaging her legs. “Oh, that’s lovely.”

Smirking, he continued his task. “You’re getting better. Guess all that dance means you’re used to learning how to move your body.”

“Yeah…the kata aren’t that different from dance forms. But strength and endurance can only come with time and practice.” Her eyes were closed as she focused on his touch instead of the aching.

His hands crept up, under her skirt, up to her folds. Jumping at the first touch, she felt her fire rise up to meet his as he stroked, grasping at her outspread cloak as his skillful fingers brought her to her peak.

Her climax left her pleasantly relaxed and sleepy. “I’ll have to return the favor later…” She said with a yawn.

“Don’t worry about it. I take it that helped with the aching?” His fingers played with her hair.

She lightly smacked him. “You know that already. Things are just reversed, this time.”

He blinked. “I did?” He asked.

A light snore was his answer. Shaking his head, he picked her up and carried her back to camp.

“Tonight feels like a night for nostalgia.” Zeno commented to Guen, Abi, and Shuten that night, watching the moon.

“You’re right.” Abi agreed. “With how Yun has become able to see us if we don’t hide from him, maybe Yona does have something to do with how you were able to see us again, after so long, if living with Ik-su for years didn’t do it.”

“…how long were you watching?” Zeno finally asked.

“Not like there was much else exciting to watch.” Shuten pointed out.

“Zeno doesn’t think him wandering around would be that exciting.”

“Better than watching you getting hurt.” Guen reminded him. “But some of the things you wound up doing still baffle me. Did that brothel madam really think you were a girl? You don’t look like a girl at first glance…or fiftieth.”

“You must not have been watching when Zeno learned that the ‘madam’ wasn’t REALLY a madam…along with the rest of the house. Zeno’s just glad he was able to talk his way out before he had to do anything.” It was then Zeno noticed Hak. His fire was troubled, and he was wielding his weapon at some unseen foe.
“Mister shouldn’t worry so much; it’ll shorten his life.” He said, the other fading away as Hak’s attention landed on him.

“You’re still up?” Hak asked.

“It’s a beautiful night with a beautiful moon, but your fire’s too troubled for such a night.” Zeno replied.

“Sorry to disturb you.” Hak half-apologized, half-snarked.

“Regardless, you shouldn’t rush ahead to your death. It’s faint, but there is the unmistakable hint of death on you.” Zeno remarked.

“You predicting my death too?”

“That’s not Zeno’s intention. Sorry for scaring you. But Mister does have a habit of getting injured.”

“Not you Dragons are any different. White Snake is ready to toss his life away in a heartbeat for Hime-san.” Hak pointed out.

“It’s not the same with the Dragons. If we die, a replacement is born. The power will be passed down, even if we as people die. But Mister isn’t replaceable and needs to watch out for himself more.” Zeno said matter-of-factly, even though he was the exception to the rule.

“Don’t act like the Dragons are replaceable.” Hak told Zeno with a frown. “It doesn’t matter if the power chooses a replacement, nothing can replace you Monkeys as people she cares for. She’s lost too many of them already.”

Zeno smiled and bowed. “Zeno thanks you on behalf of the Four Dragon Warriors.”

Hak snorted. “Don’t let White Snake hear that or he’ll complain. Even if you’ve got the most claim to represent them.”

“Perhaps. But you have the Dragons here to help, so you don’t need to shoulder it all alone.” Zeno conceded. “Here’s the Miss.”

Yona jogged up. “Are you alright, Hak? I got cold.”

“Now Zeno will go to bed!” Zeno chimed as he ran off.

Hak jumped when Yona pressed a loquat to his mouth. “You seem uneasy, maybe something sweet will help?”

He just shrugged as he chewed. “…you don’t have to talk to me, but I’d like you to talk to someone.” She said quietly.

He froze. “You two were always a pair. It seemed like at least the two of you would always be together. I…I know you’ll just say it’s your duty but…I’m sorry if looking after me is…”

He cut her off with a kiss to the forehead. “Even if it was a duty, there’s nowhere else I’d want to be.” He murmured. “I was only betrayed by my best friend; you watched your love kill your father and steal your throne.”

“That doesn’t lessen the impact on you. So please, don’t trivialize your feelings.” She leaned up and he leaned down and their lips met. “We won’t avoid Su-won forever, not if we try to help the places in need of the most aid. Your life means more to me than his death.” She whispered as she ended the
He didn’t know how to response to that, so he just let himself be pulled back to the tent.

“You want to go to the Kai Empire?” Yona asked with a blink.

“Yeah; I don’t know much about it, but the Sen Province is a harsher land than Fire’s, so they might have something that will be able to grow in the places where the drought is the worst. There was a rumor, of a ‘magical’ crop—“

“IZA!!” Zeno suddenly exclaimed. “That’s the name of the crop Miss!” He cheered.

“It’s real?” Yun said with a blink.

“Zeno heard of it a long time ago, but he had been looking in Kouka, not in Kai or Sen! Sen Province has been bouncing between Kouka and Kai for so long it’s almost easier to think of it as its own country!” He elaborated.

“Kai isn’t the power it once was.” Yona commented. “It’s pretty much two countries now; southern Kai, which has the Emperor’s cousin on the throne there in Yuukyou and is the current seat of imperial power, and northern Kai, where powerful local families hold sway in the different provinces. The most powerful family has control of Tenchou and while they pay lip service to the south, the true power rests with them.”

“It all reminds Zeno of what happened in Kouka, between King Il and the Generals.” Zeno remarked, only to be jumped by Kija and Jaeha for bringing it up.

“Anyway, it shares the border with Fire, and is nowhere near the nomads or the centers of power. The main power is the Li family, headed by Li Hazara. I’m only planning on going to a small farming town close to the border, so as long as we keep a low profile, we’ll be fine. If we keep a low profile. We need to keep a low profile.” Yun firmly repeated himself at the end, as if saying the words enough would be enough to keep everyone in a low profile.

Everyone marveled at the expanse of brilliant red maples. “Wow…” Yona breathed out. “This is Maple Valley, right? Where all the trees are maples and always show their autumn colors?”

“Has to be.” Hak remarked.

“The best places to cross the border were either through this valley, or over a rope bridge over the mountains. I didn’t spot any troops or villages when I rode Jaeha, so I decided we should go through here.” Yun explained.

“It’s almost as bright as Hime-sama’s hair!” Kija exclaimed, before noticing Shin-ah staring at something. “What is it Shin-ah?”

“…There’s a building.”

“What kind of building?” Yun asked. “I didn’t notice one when I was scouting with Jaeha.”

Crouching down, Shin-ah drew the symbol he saw next to the characters. “Hot springs?” Jaeha commented.

As one, everyone turned to look at Yun. “What?!” He demanded, flushing.
“Can we?” Yona asked with pleading eyes, Zeno mimicking her expression next to her.

“…Fine. For a couple of days! If it’s cheap!” He conceded, not quite willingly to admit to what a good idea it was. *Things won’t change that much if we take a couple days…and the springs could help soothe Yona’s muscles after all that training.*

Yona sunk into the water with a sigh, Ao swimming in the water with her. “Kaya never knew there were places like this!” She exclaimed, joining Yona.

Yona giggled. “The baths at the castle are nice, but they can’t beat a natural hot spring.”

“This water looks like it’s full of nutrients. Our skin will be really soft afterwards.” Yun commented.

“Really?!” Yona and Kaya both exclaimed, although Yun couldn’t hear Kaya.

“If you talk quietly, maybe we can have some proper girl talk?” Kaya suggested.

Yona flushed more at the thought. “Zeno doesn’t look like he could know anything about sex. He’s just too…”

“Perky? Cheerful? Naïve-looking?” Kaya proposed, moving to the side of the women’s spring opposite the dividing wall.

“All of the above.” Yona admitted as she joined her. “It just seems like a foreign concept, even without factoring in the respect all three of us feel for you, for helping him remember how enjoy the little moments, when he was ready to just…it too…”

“Perky? Cheerful? Naïve-looking?” Kaya proposed, moving to the side of the women’s spring opposite the dividing wall.

“Intercourse bought us more time together. Zeno thinks that even if at the start it was for Zeno’s sake, by the end, it was as much because of his own feelings as for Zeno’s. There was an outline of a sleeping dragon with Ouryuu-kami, and Zeno thinks it’s meant to be my dragon self.”

Yona froze. “The Yellow Dragon God is the First Dragon, the Dragon of Life. It’s nearly impossible to imagine, but…you’ve been interacting with the mortal world more easily.”

“Kaya could—she might—live? Again?” The last two words was more mouthed than anything.

“I don’t know for sure, but at a minimum, you’d be able to join Zeno in the mortal plane.” Yona admitted. “I know this isn’t exactly girl talk…”

“Well we can get to that now.” Kaya assured her. “Going off how Zeno reacts, Hak-sama has to be satisfying you.”

“Extremely. I read in some books that I really wasn’t meant to be reading that sometimes you have to fake it, but I can’t imagine why you’d have to fake it. I think Hak might subconsciously remember things from being Ha-kun, given how…skilled…he’s been, satisfying me. The only time he’s gone to the red light district is with me when I’d go to Mistress Sayuri’s, and it doesn’t feel like he could have gotten it from reading.” Yona admitted. “It might be as much because of the fire in both of us reacting and resonating with each other, since his touch leaves trails of fire behind.”

“Zeno and Kaya were both more enthusiastic than good, those first few times, but it didn’t matter, since it had been something I’d given up on, when I isolated myself. So it was good simply for that
fact. But he knew things I hadn’t, not that I knew much beyond the sword and the sheath explanation Mama gave me.” Kaya explained.

“Shuten was the ‘expert’ on such things, and when him-me was working up the nerve to actually be intimate with Ha-kun, he had been pretty graphic in his descriptions. Zeno was present, and seemed to be stuck red-faced for a day afterwards. Abi helped too; it was one of the few times where they worked together without fighting or arguing…much.” Yona told her.

“When Kaya would enter Zeno’s dreams, it was great, mostly because it was how we wanted it to be and not reality. And ever since Ouryu-kami reached Zeno that first time, and we were able to mutually touch each other in the real world, well…”

“…I get the feeling if Jaeha tries to show off his experience, Zeno will either leave him dumbstruck or taking notes.” Yona commented as she took in the red face and blissful expression on Kaya’s face.

“Definitely. I don’t think he cares a lot, but I’d like to know more about how I might…with my mouth…” Kaya trailed off, suddenly too embarrassed to voice what she meant.

“Truthfully, I’ve been remembering things from him-me’s solo fun, so I kind of already knew what to do, with my hands anyway. But…” She leaned in to whisper in Kaya’s ear. “When it comes to taking him all the way into your mouth, go slow and in stages. I’ve only done it the one time, mostly because it feels too weird, so I usually only take the head in. There have definitely been no complaints.” Yona admitted with a blush. “It takes a bit to figure out, but you can also tighten your muscles when he’s inside.”

“Really?” Kaya asked, amazed.

Yona nodded. “You haven’t tried taking him in your mouth before?”

Kaya shook her head. “It just wasn’t something that really crossed my mind before, and never came up in the thousands of dreams we shared together. But we read the book Mistress Sayuri gave you, and the thought of doing that, with him…just hasn’t left me alone.” She admitted. “But he really likes his hair being played with.”

“Hak likes it when I dig my nails in. And really likes fondling my breasts. I think if I let him he’d want to see if he could make me peak from that alone.” Yona mused.

“The things Zeno can do with his tongue…” Kaya’s whole upper body was turning red at the thoughts.

Yona couldn’t contain the giggles that were as much in amusement as out of embarrassment over Zeno and sex together.

Hak and Zeno shared a smirk at the quiet female giggles. “I think they’re comparing notes.” Hak whispered.

They were over in the bath portion, while Yun, Jaeha, and Shin-ah were in the hot spring part. Kija had left without getting it, and Hak was ninety five percent sure he had spotted a spider or something.

“Does that bother mister?” Zeno asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Not really. She needs some female friends; she’s always been around guys and had male friends.” Hak replied, trying not to stare at Jaeha’s dragon leg.
Kija’s dragon arm was always partially visible, and so was just part of his overall image. Somehow, Hak was sure that if there were other guests around, Jaeha would either skip out entirely, wait for it to be empty, or hide it somehow. *He probably hides it because it’s not beautiful.* With a mental shrug, Hak turned back to his task and tried to ignore the thoughts the giggles were bringing up.

Chapter End Notes

Decided to split up the hot spring trip between a couple of chapters.
“Your predecessor was your father?!” Jaeha exclaimed, shocked. *They actually let—how could a father—*

It was a toss-up over what shocked him more; Hakuryuu Village letting their dragon reproduce, or that a father would turn his claws on his son.

Kija nodded. “I was only allowed to meet my father under supervision. This scar is the only time he touched me.”

“You’re awfully cheerful about it.” Jaeha remarked.

“Why should I be gloomy about it? This is the symbol of his desire to serve his King and master. So I’ll take this desire on my back, and live. But other people always gave me pitying looks when they saw it, so I keep it covered.”

Jaeha frowned as he remembered Zeno’s comment, after the boy’s funeral. “Then how did Zeno know of them?”

“I don’t know. It’s hazy, but I think I met one of the other dragons when I was little, the night the red star appeared in the sky.” Kija mused. “Maybe it was Zeno’s predecessor; since Zeno seems familiar. It couldn’t have been him though; he’d only have been a baby.”

“I’ve had to beat up most of my successors when they die, for what they were party to. Instead of being free in any way, they became caught up in the hate the clan has swum in.” The first Ryokuryuu commented, unheard by Kija.

“At least they didn’t wind up haunting their successors like mine have, or turning into curses like the Seiryuu seem to have become.” Kija’s ancestor reminded his.

*But what of the Ouryuu? What fate has karma and history bestowed on Zeno and his predecessors?* Jaeha wondered.

Jaeha just stared at where his skin turned into scales around his knees, quiet. “…I’m sorry I called you a puppet.”

Kija blinked, before a pleased smile crossed his face.

“I got the owner to give me some sake; care to join?” Hak offered, holding up the bottle to Jaeha.

“Why not?” Jaeha agreed.

Three cups in, Jaeha felt he had enough liquid courage in him to ask. “Why her?”
Hak was pensive as he stared into his cup. “We first met when I was four and she was one. When that tiny, bright girl latched onto me and wouldn’t let go…it felt like coming home. Staying at her side…nothing else feels more right. Even if she had never returned my feelings it would still be like that. And since she does return my feelings, I’d be a fool to leave.” He downed the contents of his cup.

“Hmmmm…” Jaeha hummed in thought. If only I knew for sure if wanting her or him or both of them was because of the dragon’s blood or is all me. Even if the dragon’s blood would make it more mind-blowing.

“And no, sharing is not on the agenda.” Hak added, pouring another round.

“Like I already didn’t know that.”

“Then stop fantasizing about it.” Hak deadpanned.

“You’re asking me to not fantasize about beauty?” Jaeha snorted, a little too buzzed to care much at how not-beautiful the sound was. “You’ve got better odds at getting Kija to stop going on about the sacred Brotherhood of the Dragon Warriors.”

The dark fire rose up to just under the surface. “As long as it stays fantasy. And if the chance to change that comes, it’s two for one.” Hak smirked at the end, and it was completely unfair how darkly sexy it made him as he stood and went to join Yona in bed, leaving a semi-aroused Jaeha with the bottle.

I’m a grown, mature, male adult. I should not be reacting like a horny teenager in a teahouse for the first time.

(He was still that horny teenager experiencing a teahouse for the first time.)

Once Jaeha’s breathing had evened out into sleep, Kaya poked Zeno awake. Grabbing his hand, she led him to one of the smaller springs. “Did you have fun gossiping with the Miss?” He asked once they were both in the water.

“It wasn’t really gossiping, even if Yona did give me some…advice…on something I’ve been thinking about lately.” Kaya half-protested, twiddling her fingers.

“What about?” He asked with a blink.

“…with my mouth…” He could barely hear what she said, but the look to his groin he clearly caught.

And Heavens above if that idea didn’t send a jolt of lust to his groin. “You-you don’t—“ He swallowed against a dry throat.

“I want to.” She met his eyes as she said that.

He sat on the side of the spring, and she knelt between his legs. They were both blushing. “This seems so embarrassing! Even those we’ve done stuff countless times…” He admitted.

Resting her hands on his thighs, she reached up for a kiss. “Maybe because this time, it’s about me focusing on you and your pleasure, and not the other way around?” She suggested after the kiss ended. “Not that the other way isn’t wonderful!”
“…it always seems amazing to me, how my touch and my actions can generate such a response in you…” He whispered. “My own goddess who blessed me with a new life…”

Despite the lingering blush, she felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. “Then let this goddess worship her husband, the dragon god…” Kissing deeply one last time, she turned to what she was aiming to do.

Breathing deep, she began by taking the head of his…hardness…into her mouth.

(Every other word felt too crude)

He was leaking the fluid that preceded his seed, and it tasted salty, with something that reminded her of sunlight. Exploring with her tongue, he jumped as she teased at the slit, and he grew harder as she worked her way down.

Yona had advised going in stages, but as she took him deeper and deeper, she remembered something she had forgotten from when she had been alive.

No gag reflex.

She went slow, but then her nose brushed the weirdly soft hair at the base, curls of gold thread. Her fingers dug into his thighs, and she didn’t need to look to know that his own hands were clinging to the rocks, fighting an urge to bury themselves in her hair.

It didn’t feel weird in the way she had expected, based on what Yona had shared. Rubbing her thighs together, she realized just how wet she was, from feeling Zeno’s heartbeat on her tongue and how his thighs trembled, trying to keep still and not thrust into her mouth and maybe hurt her.

Reaching for one of his hands, she squeezed it, and he latched onto it like a vice.

Yona hadn’t mentioned what to do once she did have him all the way in her mouth, but then Kaya remembered what that book had said, about humming or making noise.

So she did.

Zeno went rigid, and then it was like liquid sunshine pouring into her as he came, and she couldn’t help moaning at the tingles it left behind.

He was soft again, and she carefully let him slip from her mouth. She blushed when she looked up at his face, seeing the sheer…rapture as he panted. “You’re not the only one who’s amazed at how their touch can cause such reactions.” She commented, gently pulling him back into the spring.

“Wow…” He breathed out, before hugging her tightly. “Why did we never do that before?”

“It was an idea that never crossed my mind; I can’t say why you never thought of it.” She replied.

He scratched his cheek. “It always struck me as…degrading, I guess? Mostly because when Zeno’d save women being raped, most of the time they were forced to do that. Not anymore though.” He admitted.

Suddenly, he lifted her up onto the edge of spring, a reversal of the positions they had been in previously. “Your turn.” He whispered, before his tongue darted out to taste her folds.

Kaya sunk her fingers into his hair as his very talented tongue went to work. Between that and the lingering thrill at having Zeno respond to her so meant she was soon shuddering her peak.
Back in the water with him, they exchanged broad grins. “Zeno guesses he should be extra nice to the miss?”

“The only way you could be any nicer to her is by servicing her, and that is just about the last thing on any of our minds.” She laughed at his expression at the idea.

Grabbing her, he claimed her mouth in a kiss. Teenage stamina meant he was soon hard again, and then he was inside of her, her sitting in his lap as he thrusted up and set to work worshiping her breasts.

Pulling at his hair, she remembered something else Yona had mentioned. Biting her lip, to give her something other than lust and pleasure to focus on, she thought about the muscles she knew she had down there, and tried moving them.

She knew it worked when he moaned around a nipple, the feel of his mouth as he did going right to her core.

They were too close in height for it to really work, but they managed to at least move their tongues against each other in an approximate kiss as a finger touched her nub, making her scream her climax and not caring who heard.

He followed her, liquid sunshine filling her up to where only he could reach. Behind her eyelids, Kaya could almost see the sunshine now and the sunshine she had swallowed earlier meeting, forming a glowing light that reminded her of fireflies.

Sliding off Zeno’s lap, she cuddled up at his side and his arm wrapped around her shoulders. “Yona mentioned something else, when I told her about when we saw Ouryuu-kami in Fire.”

“?” He was feeling too lazy and sated to make more than a questioning noise.

“The Yellow Dragon God is the First Dragon…and the Dragon of Life. I haven’t had to focus as much, to interact with the mortal world. And with the dragon outline we saw with him…”

He froze as the implication hit his brain. He opened his mouth to speak, but, failing to find words, he just wrapped his limbs around her. The crook of her neck growing wet, she returned the embrace just as hard, tears of her own starting.

That first successful kiss seemed to change things between them. While they didn’t even bother attempting some pretense of distance in the night, somehow it seemed more intimate now, sleeping curled around each other. There was more lingering touches, and a higher degree of contact during the day.

She wasn’t a stranger to her husband’s eyes following her, but now they seemed to be charged with something that made her blush. Of course, if she happened to look at him while he was looking at her, he’d blush himself and look away.

And then there was the kissing itself. It was almost cute, how he’d ask, looking more like a lovesick apprentice than a king, until she finally told him that he didn’t need to ask every time, and if she wasn’t open to it, she’d tell him. She found herself craving his kisses, something she had never expected. She had heard so many different descriptions about martial relations that she had long ago decided to make up her own mind. It was crazy, how a single kiss could make her knees go weak (something she thought only happened in bad romance tales), fire lingering behind as he grew bolder, letting his hands go lower and pulling her closer.
About six weeks after that first kiss, he surprised her by taking her to a hot springs in the new land of Fire. Naturally, his Monkeys came along as ‘escorts’, along with Yun-mei and a woman the green one introduced as Gi-mei. “Everything is calm, and I trust that things will run smooth enough without me. They’ve managed longer periods when I toured places with Guen.” He’d told her. They had the run of the place, as there were no other guests.

Day three of their stay found her enjoying the small spring adjacent to their room, one the proprietress described as a ‘couples spring’, making both of them blush. There was a knock on the screen separating the bathing area from the spring proper. “You don’t need to knock.” She answered.

He came out, hair piled on his head, and by the time she realized he was completely naked, he was in the water with her. “…you really are a red head…” Was all she could say, glad the heat of the water meant her face wasn’t red just because she had seen her husband in all his bare naked glory.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He asked with a blink.

“Some people think your hair color is fake, and figured you only had red hair on your head.” She simply explained, not about to touch how that particular question came up in an overheard discussion of the state of his ‘dragon’, as the cackling hens called it.

“My brothers wouldn’t let me do this unless I kept the color of my scales as my hair color, so they could easily spot me.” He explained, fingering one of his bangs.

A somewhat-tense silence descended on them.

“Let’s stop avoiding the topic.” She stood, the water just barely covering the edge of the hair on her mound. He swallowed hard as she walked over and straddled his lap. “The monkeys are suitably occupied elsewhere. So how about we just let things happen. No holding back.”

Reaching up, she tugged the ribbon out of her hair, letting it fall down her back. “Make me your wife.” She whispered, undoing his own hair.

He was devouring her mouth as soon as she finished speaking, cupping her face in his hands as fire filled her and she wrapped her arms around his neck and back. They moaned into each other’s mouths as their tongues danced, one they had only recently learned but had new meaning right now.

Air demanded access, and they parted enough to pant. His forehead rested against hers, and there seemed to be the faint glow of fire in his eyes. “Shall I take you to bed?” His voice rumbled through her, reminding her of the dragon he had once been.

“Yes.” She wrapped her legs around his waist as he stood, hands cupping her ass as he managed to get inside to the futon that was already set up for the night. “…I was hoping…?” He tentatively explained, laying her down gently, hovering over her, like she was a dragon’s hoard or something.

She smiled. “I kind of was too.” She admitted, feeling the hot pulsing cock against her ass.

She had felt it before, through layers of cloth, in the mornings, or in recent weeks when she was pressed up against him. But the sensations were completely different. The thrill of feeling it, and of knowing she was responsible was still there, but it was more intense.

She could only hang on as his mouth began exploring her neck, embarrassing noises coming from her mouth as his tongue tasted her pulse point. She unwrapped her legs from around his waist to let him explore lower. His mouth swallowed her moans as he fondled her breasts, leaving her torn between shying away and arching into his hands. Her fingers twisted in his hair as he decided to
feel her nipples with his tongue, trapping him there.

She couldn’t contain her shudder when his teeth grazed a nipple. “No?” He asked, indecently composed despite the rod of fire scorching her lower down.

“...I’m close to my bleeding time. They’re more sensitive right now.” She admitted with a blush.

Which was crazy, considering what they were doing.

“You can keep going, just...no teeth.” She assured him.

She had left her legs spread when she unwrapped them from his waist, and now spread them more as his face drew level with her mound and folds and nub. Propping herself up on her elbows, she took in the look on his face. Hunger and lust and want and...love? “Beautiful.” He murmured, exploring her folds with his fingers, butterfly light. “...can I taste?” He asked, eyes flicking up to her face.

Thinking, she bit her lip and nodded. She jumped as his tongue followed the path his fingers had taken. She nearly screamed at the first touch of his tongue on her nub, digging her fingers into the futon beneath her. Dropping off her elbows, she planted her feet on the floor and lifted her hips.

Getting the hint, his hands massaged her ass as he helped her hold the position, and his tongue dove inside. It felt like his tongue was trying to taste every bit of her. “If you don’t hurry up and put your cock in me, I might resort to violence.” She panted out, full of fire.

She tasted her juices as he kissed her deeply, and his cock rested against her entrance. The look in his eyes when he pulled back enough to meet her eyes as he began pushing in reminded her of the dragon he had been once. At a loss at where to put her hands, she clung to his shoulders when he encountered something. “Do it.”

There was a flash of pain, then his hips were flush with hers and she could feel him, pulsing inside of her and gathering the fire filling her to him. He was kissing her again, hard and deep, and she pushed against him, telling him wordlessly to move.

Despite her eyes being closed, it felt like they were rolling back in her head as he moved in and out. Arching, she moaned and wrapped her legs around him again as he started on her neck, tasting and kissing and a hint of biting. “I don’t—near—“ He managed to say, his mostly even thrusts turning erratic.

She was unreasonably touched at how he didn’t want to come before her.

Somehow, she found the presence of mind to grab one of his hands. Guiding him down to her nub, she led his hand in how to touch it.

That was all it took.

Nearly screaming her peak, she just moaned loudly as he followed her over the edge, filling her with his fire, right into her core.

Hak’s eyes snapped open. He was painfully hard. “Yona.” He hissed through his teeth, already pulling at her night robe.

Her folds were drenched when his hand tested the waters, the feeling of her walls sinfully good. Her hands helped him, and he fought to not come immediately as he slid inside of her. “Hak.” She
whispered against his mouth. “I was dreaming of it too.”

“It won’t take much.” He warned.

“Then what are you waiting for?” She challenged, fire blazing as she repeated Ha-kun’s words. “Make me your wife.”

They moaned into each other’s mouth as a fast and hard pace was set, the fire consuming both of them blazing too bright for anything gentler.

It didn’t last long, not with as keyed up as they both were. She pillowed her head on his arm once he rolled off of her to the side. “I love hot springs.” Hak remarked with a grin.

Yona laughed. “So do I.”

Yun took one look at her in the morning and started brewing the tea without a word or look of disappointment.

The fact he could tell what had happened without a word from her was embarrassment enough.

Thankfully, she managed to finish the necessary cups before the others came out. She knew her dragons would have felt it, even in sleep, but they couldn’t tell yet just what she was doing, beyond the arousal and climax.

“Hak! I forgot to grab my soap; can I borrow yours’?” Yona yelled.

She just watched, wide-eyed, as not one, but six, bars of soap were tossed over. Kaya laughed at her expression. “Can’t be helped.” She reminded Yona.

“…Did you leave yourselves any soap?” Yona asked, biting her lip as blatantly embarrassed silence was her answer.

“Toss Droopy Eyes’ bar back.”

“How about I toss five back over, and you can fight over whose I kept?” Yona suggested over Jaeha’s protests.

Chapter End Notes

Well I’ve written Zeno/Kaya erotica; time for a road trip to hell.
In the end, Yona tossed back over all but one bar of soap. “So, did the two of you…last night…?” She asked Kaya tentatively once they retreated to the far end of the pool.

Kaya flushed, even as a pleased smile crossed her face. “He really enjoyed having my mouth on him. One thing I had forgotten from when I was alive was that I don’t have a gag reflex, so it didn’t bother me so much.”

“He really enjoyed having my mouth on him. One thing I had forgotten from when I was alive was that I don’t have a gag reflex, so it didn’t bother me so much.”

“Hiryuu and Ha-kun’s first time was at a hot spring, and Hak and I both dreamed of it last night.” Yona admitted. “I guess we didn’t wake the others up. Even if Yun knew without me saying anything.”

“He’s very perceptive.” Kaya reminded her. “I told him what you had said, but he couldn’t say anything. But if what you think might happen does, then…”

“I hope it does, for both of you.” Yona whispered quietly, a prayer for a second chance.

“Do we really have to talk about girls?” Yun asked, after Jaeha proposed the topic.

“Considering the only other common talking is the dragons…” Hak reminded him. “But if you’re fishing for details, then forget it.”


“Hime-san DID have tea with a brothel madam once a month for years; my bases are covered, and as you all know, there have been no complaints.” Hak said flatly.

“…questions about what?” Kija asked tentatively. “Baa-Baa made sure I read the…pillow books?...the village has, but I’ve never…”

“About how to please a woman.” Jaeha said bluntly. “About things that can only be learned hands-on, not from books.”

Kija seemed stuck on a permanent shade of pink. “…is sex really that great? I know Hak and Hime-sama enjoy it very much, and I know I do have to marry and sire children one day…”

“And share the prestige of the Hakuryuu?” Yun asked.

“My village is very isolated, and everyone is related to everyone else by varying degrees. Sometimes, the villagers who make their way in the outside world will bring back orphans or their own children by outside mothers, but the main thing keeping the village healthy, despite being so related, is the dragon’s blessing. I don’t really know how it works, but as long as each Hakuryuu has at least one child, even if it’s just their successor, any potential problems are kept at bay.” Kija explained.

“Your village didn’t look that big, and if everyone is interrelated, with no new blood coming in, I would have thought after that long isolated there’d be problems, but this explains it.” Yun remarked.

“If only they weren’t so eager about it! Only the fact that polygamy is permitted as long as all parties consent keeps them from fighting each other. Baa-Baa hasn’t forced me to marry yet, thankfully, and
I think there have been Hakuryuu that haven’t married…”

“Your village is sounding better and better.” Jaeha commented, intrigued by the thought of women throwing themselves at one of the Dragons. “My village sees the dragons as an unwelcome burden, so the only time village women come near Ryokuryuu is to feed them as babies.”

“Even after the successor is born?” Kija asked with a blink.

“Judging by my predecessor, the only companion Ryokuryuu can have in the village is their hand and sake.”

“No wonder you like teahouses.” Hak deadpanned.

“…stay away…predecessor raises successor until they die. Then…just left alone.” Shin-ah admitted, Zeno glomping him in a hug.

Jaeha perked up. “Shall I inform you about what can pass between a man and a woman when they’re alone?” With Hak stubbornly keeping quiet, he was dying to share his knowledge.

There was an unfamiliar sense of mischief around Shin-ah, and it wasn’t because of Zeno. “…I can see for miles even with my mask on. People don’t always believe in privacy, so…I’ve seen a lot.”

Jaeha deflated, to everyone’s amusement. “I haven’t really thought much about girls. I’m curious in an academic sense, but you’d be too crude for my tastes.” Yun said with a frown.

All eyes turned to Zeno. “What?” Zeno said with a blink.

“You’ve traveled a lot for Yona-chan, right?” Jaeha questioned.

“Yup. Zeno went with her to Mistress Sayuri’s a few times too, before Mister found out and insisted on going with her.” He confirmed.

“So?” Jaeha leaned in.

“So what?”

“Surely you weren’t alone during those travels.” Jaeha said with a smirk.

Guen, Abi, and Shuten, invisible to all but Zeno, were desperately trying not to laugh. “Well…Zeno would join up with other travelers at times.” Zeno admitted, blankly innocent on the outside, but laughing on the inside.

“Oh!” Zeno exclaimed. “Zeno’s hasn’t had sex, he’s afraid.” After all, he made love with Kaya. “As for the kind of girl he likes…”

Even Yun leaned in closer with the others as Zeno’s face became wistful. “Cute and cheerful, no matter what happens.”

Jaeha’s mind flashed to the girl spirit he had seen around Zeno. Ah...she must have died before they could do anything. Maybe illness? I’ll ask later, when I can get him alone.
“I’d prefer a girl who is not going to throw herself at me. Who wants to be with Kija, not necessarily Hakuryuu-sama.” Kija admitted.

“…calm…” Shin-ah whispered, mind calling up Ayumi.

“Someone I can have an intelligent conversation with.” Yun declared.

“So Droopy Eyes, what about you?” Hak asked.

“Beautiful.” Jaeha said automatically.

“…and?” Zeno asked after several minutes, when Jaeha didn’t add anything to his list. “What else would Ryokuryuu like in a girl? Chatty? Kind? Or,” He got a sly look on his face. “Someone like the Miss?”

At that, Jaeha abruptly stood and left. “Zeno didn’t expect that reaction.” He commented with a blink.

“If he does end up with someone, I’ll be impressed. He doesn’t strike me as the type to settle down. Barring the ‘right’ person, if she exists.” Yun said.

That night, it was Zeno who approached Jaeha with sake. “Zeno’s sorry if he hit a nerve, asking if Ryokuryuu would like a girl like the Miss.” He said as he poured Jaeha a cup.

“…to be honest, I would probably like a girl like Yona-chan, after thinking about it.” Jaeha admitted, pouring Zeno a cup as well.

The pair drank in a comfortable silence. “…did you lose your special someone?” Jaeha finally asked.

“Consumption.” Zeno said simply. “She was already near the end, when Zeno met her. It…was longer ago than he likes to think about, but sometimes…it feels like only a few days ago.”

The girl ghost knelt next to Zeno, teary-eyed. Jaeha couldn’t really tell either way if Zeno was aware of her. Finishing his cup, Jaeha stood and went to bed, not really feeling like trying to pry more about the girl from Zeno.

“Zeno…” Kaya whispered, latching onto him.

He latched on just as tight. “I hope the Miss was right, about you living again.” He whispered.

The melancholy mood was broken by the appearance of Guen, who casually hauled Zeno onto his shoulder. “Everyone’s asleep save for us and Yona, and she wants to hang out with all of us.” He said as he walked to the spring, Kaya trailing behind, biting her lip at the look on Zeno’s face.

“It’s nice, having my own dragons, but I miss being able to be with all of you like this.” Yona admitted, slouching down in the spring so the water was up to her chin.

“Kija’s still got too much interference to see us, even with how many Hakuryuu have been appeased by your apology and having the chance to protect you through him.” Guen told her. “Yun can see us if we let him, but with only three of us, the question of where the first Ouryuu is likely going to be the first thing to come up, once it’s established that we’re real.”

“Zeno would prefer not to say anything to the young ones until he has too.” He said, snuggled up
with Kaya.

“So basically you’re gonna wait until you’re the only one who can protect everyone, be a big damn hero, get damn near butchered, and then answer things afterwards.” Shuten declared.

“It’s not like Zeno has had to really use his power in front of people he cares for. Knowingly.” He added when Abi opened his mouth to correct him.

“You using your power is the last thing I want, but I can’t stop you.” Yona said. “Part of…part of why he didn’t want you on the battlefield, being his shield…beyond his suspicion of just what Yellow Brother had done…he could never have lived with himself if he’d been wrong, either about its exact form or any limits. I don’t want anyone to die for me.”

There was a strange overlap to the last sentence, making Zeno blink back tears. “I understand, Ou-sama.” He acknowledged with a bow of his head.

“Su-won’s near where the dragon gods descend.” Abi declared after a few minutes.

“I think that’s when he won’t be able to deny it to himself anymore. Only his disbelief in anything relating to the gods or the supernatural has kept him from realizing.” Yona mused. “I know I said not to steal them back or destroy them unless he shares them but…Once he reaches him-me’s death, it would really be up to Zeno. He watched all of you, but most of what I remember is when he watched Zeno…and all the ‘small fires’ you dealt with. So once he hits that point, it’s not for me to decide if he continues.”

“Zeno isn’t sure what he wants to do once he reaches it.”

“Zeno, what does Iza look like?” Yun asked the next day, as they crossed the border.

“No clue. Zeno had heard of an edible plant that could grow anywhere and stay edible for a century after being harvested, but he doesn’t know how true any of that is.” He explained, making Yun droop.

Yona did her best not to sigh out loud as the village girls debated accessories, a headache already forming from the weight of the headdress she was wearing. Somehow, she had been drafted to dance for the Senri Village Fire-Quelling Festival, as the man in charge of the Iza seeds wouldn’t let them even taste it unless one of them danced.

As dancing was surprisingly not something Yun could do, she was volunteered.

“Your hair’s so pretty!” One girl, Aro, gushed. “You should grow it out!”

“Well…someone thought they could take advantage, and grabbed my hair. I could only get away by cutting my hair off.” Yona explained. “It’s grown out some since then, but it’s a pain to deal with when it is long, tangling and frizzing and refusing to stay in any kind of hairdo.”

“Ne, Yona, the guys you’re with…are you seeing any of them?” Another girl asked.

“Hak and I are engaged. About the only reason we’re not married officially yet is we don’t have the money yet.” Yona revealed, to universal groans, the loudest of which came from Aro. “Figures the best one would be taken!” She grumbled. “So you’d consider yourselves already married?” She asked.
Yona could tell Aro was hoping for a chance. “Pretty much.” Yona tugged on Aro’s sleeve, pulling her down to whisper in her ear. “If you do want to try your luck, he’s part of a package. Him and me both.”

Aro’s face turned as bright as her hair. “T-That’s okay—!!” She stammered, drawing curious looks from the other girls. “What about the others?”

“You’ll probably have the best luck with Jaeha. I’m not sure about the others, but Zeno…lost his sweetheart a few months ago, so I don’t think…” Yona replied, hedging the truth a bit when it came to Zeno.

“But he’s so cheerful! I’d never have guessed!” One of them exclaimed.

“He promised her he’d keep smiling. Kija’s grandmother has been trying to get him to marry, and since he’s the most eligible bachelor in his village, the girls have been rather…forceful…in ‘getting the prize’. Shin-ah…his clan’s tradition is for unmarried people to wear a mask in public, so you might have wrecked any chance there. Yun hasn’t shown any interest in anyone…” Yona shrugged.

While Yona had been informing the girls of their chances of success, Aro had come across The Hairpin. “This…this is gorgeous! It’s gold, right? It goes with your hair perfectly! Did Hak—” She cut herself off when she saw the look on Yona’s face, silently handing the box she had taken to keeping The Hairpin in back.

“You never did come watch me dance. Now, in place of the fan I once used, you will see me dancing with a sword, should the chance to see me dance come...”

Hak had seen Yona dance many times before, but this particular dance tickled something in the back of his mind, in the part he had come to associate with Ha-kun.

It was definitely not one he recalled seeing her practice before.

The villagers were equally blown away. There were murmurs over her dancing with a sword, but none took it as a threat.

It struck them as a lament of sorrow, with a prayer for peace.

“What do you think she’s thinking of?” Guen asked, as the dance ended and the villagers called for an encore.

“Who knows?” Hak muttered, as she obliged them and started up a dance he’d seen her do before.

“Once Yun tries this, he’ll want the Iza seeds even more than he already does.” Yona remarked as she and Hak ate the Iza seed dumpling soup.

Finishing quickly, she turned her attention to the headdress. “My head feels like it weights a ton…”

“It was throwing you off some. Not that anyone noticed.” He said, biting back a laugh.
“Stop laughing and help me with this.” Yona grumbled, fumbling with the unfamiliar weight of the headdress.

“Yes yes.” Hak did burst out laughing when the headdress came off and he saw the state it had left her hair in.

Glaring, she fought to smooth it back down. “What does my hair do this to me?!” She wailed.

“That’s the first time in a while that I’ve heard you complain about your hair.”

“For the most part, it was for others, complaining about it.” She admitted, confirming what he suspected. “But after complaining about it so much, I do hate it at times for real.”

“That dance, the first one…I don’t remember seeing you practice that one before.” He said, pretending not to see her tuck away the box containing The Hairpin.

“It’s one that he saw her doing, after Yak-shi was born, to re-familiarize herself with how to move without baby weight. It was meant to purify the souls of the dead, to help guide them to Heaven. Given the purpose of the festival, it seemed right.”

“Well I know what I’ll be dreaming of tonight. It would be nice to remember this stuff in order.” He complained at the end.

“I haven’t remembered things in order either. There’s things that I’ve remembered the whole time, like the dragons and his family, and there’s others that I’ve remembered as the years have passed and I’ve gotten older.

Chapter End Notes

In Japan, you don’t pour your own sake, but whomever you’re drinking with pours your drink, and you pour their drink.

Trivia that didn’t make it in. ‘Kouka’, when Hiryuu became King, would have been written with the characters for ‘small fire’. After he had united multiple provinces, the characters changed to what they are in series, which is ‘high flower’.

Another reason they need to animate another season of Yona? So we can actually see her dance at the festival.
“Where did that outfit come from?” Hak asked.

“It’s the village’s wedding garb. All the village women wear it when they marry. It was the only fancy outfit available.” Yona explained. “If we’re going to keep up the entertaining troupe guise, I guess Yun or I will need to make me my own dance outfit.”

“…is it strange, that seeing you dressed like that, makes me wish it was for real?” He murmured, nearly too low for her to hear.

Laying her hand on top of his, she gave it a quick squeeze.

“The girl with the braids, Aro, had been very disappointed when I said the only reason we weren’t married yet is because we don’t have the money. I told her if she wanted to try her chances, that we were a package deal.” She told him, making him laugh.

“Droopy Eyes is just loving all the attention. Though I think everyone but Shin-ah is enjoying the attention.” He remarked.

“I gave the girls their chances of success. Jaeha is probably the only one they could get all the way with.” She said. “Help me get this off?”

Hak grinned broadly as he stood, holding a hand out to help her up. Interlacing their fingers, they walked to where the tents had been set up for the night.

Unnoticed by them, Aro had been watching the last bit, working up the nerve to ask them if Yona had been serious about what she had said earlier. “They’re so close…there’s no way I could intrude on that, even if only for one night…”

Sighing, she turned and walked back home. “I hope one day I find someone as completely in love with me as Hak is with Yona…”

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She could tell she was out of shape, her husband’s monkeys joining him in making sure that she didn’t do anything more taxing than walking or lifting a book. Thankfully Yun-mei had been on her side when it came to letting her do things. Five days after the birth, she stubbornly hauled herself out into the private family courtyard. Hiryuu had claimed Yak-shi, drawing stunned stares as he went about his normal routine, seemingly oblivious of how unusual it was to see a man wearing a baby sling to start with, let alone a king.

Her body aching in unfamiliar places, she just gritted her teeth and started the only female accomplishment she had to her name.

Dance.

Dancing was not that different from learning kata in her view. Dancing with fans that just happened to have iron ribs and pointed ends was a custom of Kaze, regardless of whether or not the dancer ever learned any other form of fighting.
Working her way through the routines she had learned as a child, she paused, before beginning one she had only learned after Hiryuu defeated her and she consented to marriage.

Should a woman outlive her husband in Kaze, it was her duty at the funeral rite to perform this dance, to help pacify his soul and aid in the journey to Heaven.

Reaching the end, she just stood there with her eyes closed, taking stock of how her body felt after so long of not belonging to her alone.

“Beautiful.”

She couldn’t contain her shriek of shock as she whirled around, to see Hiryuu standing on the veranda, holding Yak-shi in such a way as to observe the dance too. “Don’t sneak up on me like that!” She complained, only half-biting back her wince as she sank down to sit on the edge of the veranda.

“I was busy admiring how graceful you were as you danced. And how beautiful.” He turned to Yak-shi, whom she was surprised to see so alert. “Right Yak-shi? Mama was really beautiful dancing.”

Yak-shi cooed while she felt her face turning red.

And tears prick at the corners of her eyes. Cursing inside how her body was not completely hers again, she flipped her fan closed with a flick of her wrist. Tucking that away, she claimed Yak-shi, who was starting to fuss. “I don’t recall ever seeing a dance like the last one before.” He commented, untying the sling from his body and helping her get Yak-shi settled again.

“…in Kaze, wives perform it at their husband’s funeral, should they out-live them. That’s about the only time it’s performed, at funerals. Most all women learn it once they are engaged, but outside a wife performing it for her husband’s funeral, any woman can fulfill that role.” She reluctantly explained. “It’s meant to help the soul reach Heaven.”

He didn’t respond to this, not really. “That should be a long time off in the future.”

But it wasn’t. All too soon, she was performing this last duty, dancing with her eyes closed so she could pretend that he was still alive and watching her dance.

Yona woke to find Hak’s face buried in her hair, and the hair under his face was wet. “He was lying, when he said that that should be a long time in the future.” He murmured.

“Yes. He…didn’t want to live like he was watching an hourglass only he could see. His body was that of a regular human’s, and when the fire raged, it shortened his life. The anger, the night past-father was killed, took ten years off a potential lifespan of eighty years. The incident where our brothers descended took twenty more.” She whispered, pulling back to look him in the eye.

“But he didn’t reach fifty.” He had no clue how he knew that.

That’s not true; he knew how he knew that.

“No. Just because the potential was there, didn’t guarantee he would live to the full potential.” She replied. “Being with her…didn’t shorten it more.” She added, sensing the budding question in his mind. “I swear.”

He shifted uncomfortably, not quite believing her. “What about now?”
“My body isn’t harmed by it. I don’t know much, but one thing they made sure of this time is that the fire wouldn’t harm my body the way it did his.” She assured him.

Hugging onto her a hair tighter, he resumed his previous position. While she fell back asleep, he stared unseeing at her bright hair. *I really hope she’s right. I can’t outlive her the way Ha-kun outlived Hiryuu.*

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Yun shook his head at the pile of dragons squashed at the other end of the tent. After waking up squished at the bottom of the pile the first night in the large tent, he made sure to bed down at the end of the tent farthest from Yona and Hak’s tent.

It was Jaeha at the bottom this morning, Kija plastered on his side. Shin-ah was half on top of Kija, and Zeno had ended up sprawled on top of the other three.

“Wonder when they’ll just give up and start out in a pile?” He wondered out loud, crawling out to begin his day.

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Shin-ah was nearly bowled over when the girls rushed into the tent in a panic. He tilted his head to the side as the noise woke the others. “Is everything okay?” Yona asked, poking her head in after seeing the girls rush by.

“When we went to get water, we saw soldiers outside the village. They turn up from time to time, but they’re just violent thugs.” One of the girls answered.

Jaeha swept the girls up in his arms, much to their delight. “Hak and I will go have a look.” Yona declared, withdrawing her head from the tent.

“Hime-sama! It’s dangerous!” Kija exclaimed, bolting after her, with Shin-ah at his heels.

“Even the masked man left…” One girl groaned.

“I wanted to hear his voice this time!” Another one complained.

“Zeno look after the girls.” Jaeha said as he stood and followed the others.

“What IS the relationship between the dancer and all of you?” The third girl asked.

“Master and dog.” Zeno replied bluntly.

“Blunt but accurate.” Kaya confirmed, unheard and unseen by all but Zeno.

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Yona reached the bluff on the edge of the village first. “We need to confirm if they’re Sen…” She trailed off as her eyes landed on the soldiers and the others ran up.

They wore the uniform of the Fire Tribe.

“Why are there Fire Tribe soldiers on this side of the border?” Kija wondered.

“They know where they are; they didn’t wander blindly across the border.” Yona remarked, taking in the map in one soldier’s hands, while the trio discussed something.

“The current rumor is that Kan Su-jin has been buying weapons from Kai.” Hak told the others.

“The border should not be this porous. We’re not talking shepherds following lost animals or
smugglers. Even when relations between Kouka and Kai were at their best, soldiers crossing the border unannounced and unauthorized was grounds for a diplomatic incident. And at other times, grounds for a war.” Yona said, eyes smoldering. “Let’s keep an eye on the border for the next couple of days, and see if it’s a prequel to something more serious.”

Yon’s thrill at getting a sizable bag of Iza seeds was dampened when he learned of the Fire Tribe soldiers in Kai. “What are they doing? Kai might not be the power it has been in the past, but still…”

“We’ll split up; Hak, Kija, and Zeno; me, Jaeha, and Yun. Shin-ah can keep a wider watch farther out.” Yona decided. “The two groups can help out with the village chores and keep an eye on things closer in.”

Aro had a little trouble looking at Yona without blushing as she, Jaeha, and Yun helped haul water, Shin-ah trailing behind. “How long have the soldiers been spotted?” Yona asked Aro gently.

“They’ve been spotted for several years now. But lately, they seem to be coming around more and more.” Aro answered. “Just beyond here is the border; the soldiers aren’t all that friendly if you wander in too often.”

Shin-ah came up right behind them. “…get down, everyone. Horses approaching.”

The group hid in the bushes besides the road as several men on horses galloped by. “They’re soldiers, but they’re not Fire or any other Tribe…” Yona commented, a sinking feeling forming in her stomach.

“That’s…Li Hazara-sama, from the capital.” One girl said.

“What?!” Yun exclaimed quietly.

“His vanguard has come through several times before, so I know it’s him.” The same girl continued.

“What the hell is going on?” Yun wondered. “The last war isn’t that far back in the past from relations to be this unrestricted…”

Li Hazara leaving Kouka with his vanguard…Fire Tribe troops freely wandering in and out of Kai... Everyone found themselves shivering a little at the hard look in Yona’s eyes.

“Things are not right. We need to get back to Kouka.” She stated.

“…who is she?” Aro wondered out loud as she trailed behind the others as they headed back to the village. “I didn’t think there existed women like her…” Even if she wasn’t engaged to Hak, I probably wouldn’t have stood a chance...

“Yun-ho-san’s tea is very relaxing” Su-won told Guen-tae. He grimaced. “Really?” He really didn’t get the appeal of his wife’s tea.

“I’ve heard that with the huge influx of orders from Southern Kai, they’ve sold out.” Su-won remarked.

“My wife’s been very busy with that. She’s exporting most of it through Awa, to help switch the merchants back to legal products.” Guen-tae replied. “If only keeping a lord in Awa was going as smoothly.”
“Oh?”

“By accident or design, everything winds up going to Yan-Kim Gi-Gan at the same time as to the new lord, if not before. The longest any of them have lasted has been two weeks. She doesn’t suffer fools; the third lord left after three days because he couldn’t handle her sharp tongue.” Guen-tae explained.

“It sounds like the simplest thing to do would be to just appoint her to be Awa’s lord, given her influence. Constantly rotating management won’t help the city recover from Kum-ji.” Su-won proposed. “And if we can find someone who is willing to learn from her and that she is willing to groom as a successor, we shouldn’t have a vacuum of leadership when she dies. I’ll have the decree drafted and sent to Awa.”

Guen-tae bowed in thanks. “I still can’t believe how I heard nothing about what was happening there. All of this could have been nipped in the bud years ago.” I worried more about the mines than anything else. What other problems might I have missed because I took reports from other areas at face value?

“Hindsight is always clearer than foresight. With how important the mines are to Earth, it is understandable that they took up most of your attention.” Su-won assured him gently.

Tapping his fingers, Guen-tae debating bringing up something that he had heard, both from overhearing the murmurs in Awa and what Yun-ho had said after her trips. Murmurs of a red-haired girl, and of a man wielding an unusual pole arm, striking with a speed and power out of keeping with its perceived weight. Not yet; I approved of His Majesty at the meeting, and he has earned my loyalty.

There’s not enough for me to question that. If I see and hear more about the pair, I’ll ask. If I don’t know anything about the truth of His Late Majesty’s death, I won’t be forced to fulfill the traditional duty of Earth when the King is murdered.

With an internal shake of his head, he took another sip of tea, wrinkling his nose as the smell wafted up. “I’m never going to like this smelly tea.”

Su-won briefly smiled turning serious. “Speaking of smelly…something to the northeast seems fishy. There may be a small fire to put out in the near future.”

“?” Guen-tae made a questioning noise. “Is it related to what you mentioned to me previously?”

“Yes. Which is why I am relying on you, General Guen-tae.” Su-won confirmed, his hawk landing on his shoulder.

Standing, he bowed. “I shall return to Chi’Shin at once.”

“Do come back again for tea.” Su-won said as he bid the general farewell.

Now alone, he contemplated his reflection in his cup. General Guen-tae is not stupid; he won’t act without proof. Yona might not know if she wants to kill me, but that doesn’t mean she would be opposed to someone else killing me. He’s like Hak, that’s why I didn’t go to him for help with my plans.

Even if Kan Su-jin is making a play of his own.

“Even with our most distinguishing features covered, we still stand out…” Yun complained as he handed out the snacks he had procured while making rounds with Zeno.
They were in the Saika slums, waiting to hear more about the Sen army’s invasion and Fire’s response. “Any word?”

“Nothing yet…” Yun said, trying not to eye the residents in the room. “…do we really have to stay here?”

“The slums are the best places to get information quickly, with the local information brokers. And it’s easier to hide.” Hak explained.

The broker of the room, Park-su, shivered at the memory of Hak’s glare. *That’s got to be that kid Ogi had been freaked out about years ago…I dunno what he’s doing here, but I’m not helping anyone stupid enough to mess with his group.*

“The hidden passages out of the city are still there and intact. But full of spiders.” Guen whispered in Yona’s ear.

She slightly nodded her head in acknowledgement. Long ago, a part of present day Saika had been the castle town around Hiryuu’s original castle, where his parents had ruled from. “Shouldn’t we go someplace safer?” Yun asked Yona.

“He’s right, Hime-sama.” Kija agreed with Yun.

“…something about all of this is making me uneasy.” Yona replied. “What we saw, near Senri Village…there’s no proof yet, but…”

It was then that a man rushed through the door, panting. “Terrible…Troops from the Kai Empire…have crossed the border!”

“What the hell? What are you smoking?” Park-su demanded, not quite believing the man.

“It’s straight from Hil Village in the north! Li Hazara is leading a large army that has invaded!” The man asserted. “And heading for Saika!”

It was two hours later when the next bit came in. “Apparently the Rokka Gates were breached! General Su-jin has lead a force to re-enforce Kah-Sho Fort.”

“Things are moving fast.” Kija remarked. “And in an unbelievable direction.”

“I wonder how well the rural areas will fare, with the Sen Army marching through.” Yun wondered.

“Aren’t the Rokka Gates supposed to be really strong?” Jaeha asked Hak. “Just how strong is Li Hazara’s army if he can breach them so quickly and easily?”

“Saika’s the next target, after Kah-Sho, if they stick to the current direction of travel.” Zeno said, studying the map.

“If the Rokka Gates were defeated.” Yona murmured to her dragons.

Yun was quickly turning into the group’s nesting mother, with how he looked after their practical needs and jealously guarded what he saw as ‘his’ duties.

“…ordered down?” Shin-ah asked.

“Kan Su-jin has been building up his forces since Grandfather’s death. Sen is moving too fast.” She began.
“If all this was to test how Kouka would respond with a new King on the throne, they wouldn’t have gone this far into Kouka.” Hak continued.

“A revolt?!” Kija whispered harshly.

“We’ll have to wait and see what happens next. If Kah-Sho falls, and depending on how much of Sen’s army comes to Saika…” Yona forced herself to breathe evenly.

“Can’t say I would put it past him, staging a coup.” Shuten remarked.

“But colluding with a foreign power? That would level the seriousness of the offense to high treason.” Abi pointed out.

Chapter End Notes

For the dance I have Yona doing first at the Fire Quelling Festival, that Hiryuu had learned from watching Ha-kun, think along the lines of the Sending from Final Fantasy X. Mostly because that’s about the only dance that comes to mind.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Su-won can no longer deny what has been staring him in the face

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“SEN PROVINCE TROOPS ARE NOW EVEN CLOSER TO SAIKA!!!”

This sent the room into chaos. “I think it more likely that Li Hazara split his forces, sending some to Saika while keeping the bulk fighting at Kah-Sho.” Yun proposed.

“You’re probably right about his forces splitting, but I’m trusting Kan Su-jin less and less.” Yona replied. “Fire was the Tribe holding the throne and Hiryuu Castle before my family, and with how Hiryuu-ou founded Fire, and Tae-Jun trying to court me…”

“We need more information, but there’s no way we can leave Saika now; all the troops will be on high alert.” Jaeha noted.

“Let’s find a room for the night.” Hak suggested. “In the morning we can try to find out more.”

“Zeno will stay here for a bit longer, and see if more news comes in.” He piped up, hovering by Shin-ah.

The blindfold brought up painful memories, of another blindfolded dragon, haunting the tomb of his master.

“You sure Zeno?” Kija questioned.

“Zeno told you, his body is sturdy. So don’t worry Hakuryuu; Zeno will join the others before dawn.” He assured him with a smile.

“What are you up to?” Shuten asked once Zeno was alone in the alley, having followed the others out of the broker’s den.

“Guen said the tunnels are intact, but we still need to know where they open up in relation to the present city walls. And a viable excuse to know about their existence.” Zeno pointed out. “That’s where I come in.”

Zeno just smiled softly as he took in the sight in the room the group had rented for the night. Hak was dozing against the wall, Yona’s head in his lap. Shin-ah and Ao were pressed between Yona and the wall, spooning her. Yun was on Yona’s other side, half-buried under Kija’s dragon arm. Jaeha was curled up at everyone’s feet, and Zeno couldn’t help but be reminded of when he first saw Jaeha, bruised and chained with cold iron. What a difference sixteen years has made…escaping chains of iron to craft ones of love and affection…

“You gonna pile in too?”
Zeno jumped at Hak’s whisper. “Can mister handle another person on top of him?” Zeno asked.

Hak quietly snorted. “You’ll just wind up in the pile by morning. So get your ass in here you brat.”

“Hai, hai.” Zeno found himself replying the way he had when Ha-kun-sama had ordered him in much the same way.

Eyeing the pile, he wiggled in between Yona and Shin-ah’s legs. He could feel Kaya slip into his mind for the night, and he closed his eyes with a contented sigh.

Guen, Shuten, and Abi each found their own spot along the edge of the pile. “…so why didn’t we do this back then?” Shuten couldn’t help asking.

“In the beginning, too much potential for violence. Later?” Abi shrugged at the end.

“He respected her too much to try, no matter how platonic it would have been.” Hak whispered.

“I’ve missed this.” Dragon-them declared. “Being curled up with my brothers.”

“Don’t forget the new additions.” Him-her reminded dragon-them. “Even if we don’t have a name for Kaya’s dragon self or Yun’s.”

“But is Yun developing a dragon self, or are we just seeing him as a dragon?” She questioned. “He’s been reminding me of a nesting mother, with how he looks after us and how possessive he is of ‘his’ duties to the group.”

“Could be either. I don’t know if a human can develop a dragon self without being a dragon’s mate.” Dragon-them admitted.

They feel quiet. “…you know it’s more than likely that Su-jin is making a move to claim Hiryuu Castle and kill Su-won.” Him-her said quietly.

“I know.” She confirmed quietly. “As much as I hate it, Su-won…Su-won’s trying to improve Kouka. What matters is standing strong against any attempt to divide the Tribes any more than they already are. I don’t have the support I need. And I will not stand by as Su-jin steals what is not his to claim.”

“Agreed.” Him-her said, meeting her fiery eyes with his own.

“So we don’t want Su-won dead by any means?” Dragon-them asked, wanting vocal confirmation.

“At present, his death would plunge the kingdom into chaos and full-out civil war. I need him alive until I can be sure of being supported as King. If I can sway public feeling to my advantage and make him abdicate, that would be far better than taking the castle by force or using any chaos from his death to swoop in and gain power.” She vocalized. “Not to mention I want the whole story of the last twenty years told, and I need him alive to support his reasonings.”

“Ankoukuryuu cannot move on from his betrayal if he kills him.” Dragon-them remarked sadly.

“I don’t think he’s talked to anyone yet. I just hope we can stop him before one of them is seriously hurt, when Hak encounters Su-won for the first time since That Night.” Him-her breathed in prayer.

“It’s disturbing quiet this morning.” Yun remarked.
“The areas around the gates were barricaded to civilians as Zeno came back, so there’s been no recent information.” He told them, cracking his back as he stretched.

“Shin-ah.” He turned to her when she said his name. “Will you go with Jaeha and see what the situation outside the gates is? We also need recent news about the Fire Troops and Kan Su-jin.” Yona asked.

Shin-ah nodded.

“Kah-Sho’s been routed and Kan Su-jin is on the run!?” Kija repeated, shocked at this latest news.

“…there’s only two thousand troops outside Saika.” Shin-ah added. “They haven’t made any moves towards the gates…and they don’t look prepared to attack anytime soon.”

“They’ve breached every gate and fort between the border and Saika. So why park two thousand troops outside Saika?” Hak wondered.

“The main body of the invaders might be chasing Kan Su-jin and his forces. Or…” Jaeha trailed off.

“…or he’s joined up with the Sen invaders.” Zeno finished.

“The word was that Li Hazara brought ten thousand men. It seems like the force outside Saika is to keep Kan Kyo-ga from leaving or sending out more troops.” Hak commented. “Or to keep the general from returning. I’m not one hundred percent sure about naming him a traitor…yet.”

“Those troops can’t stay outside Saika. We need to go and scatter them.” Yona declared.

“ARE YOU CRAZY?! RAJU STOP SMIRKING!!!!” Yun screeched. “AND PUT YOUR HAND AWAY KIJA!!!”

“Yun, this invasion from Sen already threatens to sink Fire into chaos. Kyo-ga can’t do anything about the troops outside Saika. We can. If Kan Su-jin is truly retreating, and needs reinforcements, scattering them will open a path for Kyo-ga to do that. If not, we’ll be outside the gates and can follow after them.”

“But attacking those troops—“

“We’ll be fine if we pose as bandits again.” Kija assured.

“So the Dark Dragon and the Happy Hungry Bunch will make another appearance?” Jaeha half-questioned.

“Yun, don’t worry. We’ll protect your homeland, its people, and you.” Yona said with a smile and an ancient look.

“You need to stay safe too.” Yun reminded her, grabbing her hands.

“I know.” She commented. “So do we have a way out?”

“The slum people Zeno befriended said there’s secret tunnels going outside, and told him where they are!” Zeno chimed in, leaving Yun and the others wondering if that was what he had been doing last night.

“That was easier than I thought it would be.” Hak commented as they regrouped after generating
chaos in the back of Sen’s ranks.

“You’re a lot stronger now too.” Yona reminded him. “Shin-ah, did you see where Fire’s army is?”

“…they’re rushing southwest. And…it looked like Sen troops were mixed with them.” Shin-ah revealed what he had seen.

Everyone froze as Yona’s torch blazed into an inferno. Forcing herself to take a deep breath, she reined the fire back in. “He’s after Hiryuu Castle…and Su-won’s head. Hak, Jaeha, steal some horses from Sen and get them ready.” She ordered.

“Hime-sama…” Kija whispered, stunned.

“We’re going after them?!” Yun vocalized what most everyone was a little stunned by.

“Kan Su-jin is committing high treason, allying with a foreign power with the intent of overthrowing his liege lord. If he succeeds, the whole kingdom will be thrown into chaos. I will not ignore this. Su-won is my enemy, yes, but right now, he is the lesser of two evils. I will not stand by and let a high traitor STEAL my legacy and inheritance.” Yona declared.

“The cavalry can’t outpace the infantry without reducing the army’s overall strength. And a night attack is too risky. If we rest until dusk, and ride through the night, we’ll reach the battle site at about the time Kan Su-jin and Li Hazara encounter royal forces tomorrow.” Hak gently suggested.

Yona nodded sharply, forcing herself to breath long, deep breaths. Him-her and dragon-them reluctantly consented to Hak’s words, pulling back and helping pull the fire back.

It would do no good to burn out long before reaching the battlefield.

Su-won was as confident as he could be in his preparations for tomorrow, but nerves still churned his stomach and unsettled his heart. “Maybe Yona’s tale will distract me…” Even if it's unsettling in a different way...

It was the day of the meeting of the Weaver and the Herdsman, marking twenty six years since he had descended to Earth.

Heavy clouds covered the sky, meaning the Weaver and the Herdsman would not be able to meet if they lasted into the night. Everyone felt a little on edge, as they waited for their comrades to return.

As he gave the order to open the gate to the approaching caravan, made up of covered wagons and carts bearing his flag, Abi’s bird landed by him, obediently sticking a leg out so he could take its message.

The bird bore a small slip of paper, with one character on it.

Trap.

Shouts drew his attention away from the baffling message and to the gate, through which the caravan had just entered. “It’s only the heads!”

His blood ran cold as everything fell into place.

His men had been murdered and beheaded. Yuhon, knowing he would not fail to open his gates to his men, had baited a trap.
None of that mattered as Yuhon’s troops poured out of the remaining carts and wagons, and through the gate and the fighting began.

All too soon the fight was over; his remaining men too demoralized from the cruel murders of their comrades.

He was forcibly stripped to his under robe, drawing in a dozen men as he kept hitting and biting them.

He was dragged past the first wagon, piled high with the heads of his men. Mun’s head was on top, his stern face contorted in pain.

Guen was buried under just as many men as he had been as he was dragged out by his bound hands, to what would become his execution platform.

If he survived this day, he’d be one big bruise tomorrow.

Yuhon didn’t bother containing his glee. “In thanks for you more than doubling *my* kingdom, I’ll be merciful and have you cleanly beheaded with a sword.” He grabbed Hiryuu’s hair. “Such a shame for hair of such a rare color to rot with the rest of you, no matter its mongrel origins.”

He spat in Yuhon’s face, his fire raging bright and fierce, his dragon self too enraged to dampen it.

With time, he could have worked his hands free.

But time was up.

Yuhon himself forced him down with his foot. With his terror over the unnatural fire in Hiryuu’s eyes a shroud over them, he frantically gestured for his second-in-command to hurry up and behead Hiryuu.

The sword had scarcely begun to rise when, through the heavy clouds, four bolts of lightning struck the ground before the platform. White, Blue, Green, Yellow. The burst of divine power instantly charred Yuhon, his second Kei, and everyone else on the platform with him to dust. The ropes burnt away with the same blast, he stared up at his dragon brothers.

‘We have come for you brother.’ His blue brother informed him.

‘Let us destroy these treacherous humans and take you back to Heaven.’ White and Green spoke together.

Yellow said nothing, but the weight of his silence told him that he agreed with their other brothers.

And Heaven help him, he actually considered their offer.

His patience was long by human standards, but the few who had broken had been consumed completely. He still had his pride as a dragon god, and he could feel his dragon self raging, scarcely bothering to dampen the flames inside, no matter how much it hurt both of them. How dare these tiny beings try and stop him? How dare they murder his men and storm his castle, threatening all who depended on him?

Even as they both raged, memories popped up.

Mother and Father, who had whole-heartedly given their love to a mysterious infant that they knew had once been a god, and instilled in him the beliefs he lived by.
Guen, who was using the distraction to break free of those holding him, and start forcing his way through the crowd. He had sworn to protect him that first day on Earth, when they met, and never wavered from that vow. Even with his father Mun murdered because of him, his loyalty and devotion gave him pause.

Guen’s long dead little sister An, who hardly got to live as her lungs refused her the air they needed.

Yun-mei, so brilliant, yet ignored by too many just because she was born a girl, as if her gender rendered her incapable of everything they found too hard to understand.

Abi, craftily circumventing the directions of his father and elder brother. Spending his life beneath their notice meant he saw more than they realized. If only his warning had arrived in time...

Shuten, brash and greedy on the surface. Underneath, he was still brash, but the greed was the only way he could help the group he had wound up leading by force of will. He claimed to be a free spirit, but anyone could see the loyalty to those under his protection.

And Zeno; Zeno who felt too much like his yellow brother for it to be chance. Even with his yellow brother looking as he always did, he could tell something was missing. Zeno, who stayed as bright as the sun as he mothered the orphans who had flocked to his abandoned temple, knowing they would find a home there, if only for a short time.

When he had been crowned, he swore to protect the people of Kouka. He baffled the neighboring states that he subdued when he treated their people the same way.

If he let his brothers destroy humans, they would not care that only a tiny fraction of their number were trying to kill him. Guilty and innocent alike would die, and his dragon self could not have the weight of a broken vow upon him.

For he would die with his people and enemies. That he had once been the Crimson Dragon God was irrelevant.

He was human now.

The dragon inside agreed. What had begun as curiosity had long become something more. Maybe it was because he had sparked humanity’s sense of self when they had been created, maybe it was because of those humans he held near to his heart, or maybe he had truly forsaken divinity for humanity.

It didn’t matter.

He could tell the Dragon Gods were getting impatient. Taking a deep breath, he breathed out as he opened his eyes and met their gaze head on, and all of them, even the Yellow Dragon God, who had foreseen something like this, were taken aback by the resolve in his eyes.

Hiryuu, First King of Kouka, looked the Dragon Gods in the eye and gave his answer.

“No.”

Su-won could only stare at the page. He did not doubt his translation. And he found he could no longer doubt the truth of this strange book written in Yona’s hand.

It was real.
Hiryuu-ou had been real.

And Yona was Hiryuu-ou reborn.

Things began adding up. The books hidden inside poetry covers, the strange words she spoke after her father’s body hit the floor in front of her, the images over hers as she dared him to kill her…

Memories, random and inconsequential at the time, popped up with new meaning.

Her fear of his father.

The nightmares she suffered in the months before Okisaki-sama’s death.

The fire that had only been hinted at before That Night.

Her ancient eyes in Awa, as she admitted that she didn’t know if she wanted to kill him.

The way she looked at Hak when she thought no one else was watching.

“Hak…he had to have been someone important to Hiryuu, way back then. Given how she looked at him…” He marveled. “And yet…she had still wanted me? Along with him?”

If he was going to be downright honest with himself, with what he knew now…

…he wasn’t sure his revenge for his father was worth it anymore. He wouldn’t let himself regret it, and yet…

*It doesn’t balance anymore; revenge for him versus what I sacrificed.*

“But why doesn’t she know if she wants to kill me?” He whispered as he turned in for the night.

His dreams were full of fire and dragons and ancient mournful eyes.

Chapter End Notes

As for Hiryuu's face when he spits at Yuhon, think how Yona looked when Kum-ji had her by the hair.

I hope everyone enjoyed my interpretation of the dragon gods' descent, part one. So please, PLEASE, let me know your thoughts.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

(halo with horns) It's time...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a tense wait for sundown. Yona did her best to stay calm, and she could feel him-her and dragon-them doing the same, but the others could still feel her edginess. “Do you want...?” Hak whispered to her, sitting down and pulling her into his lap.

“...no...” She declined, slumping into his chest and closing her eyes.

The wolf and the cat were pacing, while the sun and moon hovered near by, the sun doing his best to pulse assurance. The dark fire curled around the torch, trying to distract, while the nesting mother fretted over everyone and everything. There were field rations in the packs of the horses Jaeha and Hak prepared, and somehow Yun got everyone to eat something.

Everyone ate mostly to satisfy Yun, unknown to him.

Finally, the setting sun shading the sky in reds and purples, they got ready to depart. “You can ride a horse?” Yun asked Kija, stunned.

“Of course, I was trained in everything that would help me serve my master. I’ve just never rode over such wide flat ground before.” Kija explained.

“Jaeha, I’m riding with you.” Yun decided, not confident in Kija’s riding ability.

So it was decided: Yun with Jaeha, Shin-ah with Zeno, Kija alone with their supplies, and Yona with Hak.

Hak pulled her up on the horse before she could dwell on the only other time she had been on a horse. “Zeno, take point with Shin-ah. He’ll make sure we’re going the right way.” He ordered.

“Okay mister!” With that they were off.

“Nervous?” Hak whispered.

“...maybe?” Yona admitted. “All I know for sure is that General Su-jin can’t survive this day.”

“Is what the Fire Tribe believe true? That they’re descended from Hiryuu-ou?” He asked.

He knew Ha-kun was from Wind, but he didn’t remember enough to know for himself.

“Yak-shi married a girl from Sky, and Yona married into the family of the first Fire General. His grandson married someone from Earth, and his great-grandson married a girl from each Tribe, starting that tradition. So there are untold numbers of people alive who are descendants, but too many records have been lost to know for sure anymore. So Kan Su-jin and his sons have a great a chance
of really being his descendant as most of us do.” She answered quietly.

Kija’s village had been isolated for so long she doubted the odds of him being a descendant, and Zeno was a contemporary.

Sen forces didn’t quite know what to make of them as they entered the field of battle, right as two unfortunate travelers were about to be killed. “You’d best leave here; it’s a battlefield now.” Yona told them, and they half-ran, half-crawled to safety.

The man she had seen crossing the border was nearly, and the quality and decoration of his armor meant it could only be Li Hazara. “Li Hazara of the Sen Province.”

He turned to her as she addressed him. “You’ve invaded Kouka Kingdom. Frightening its people will only deepen the severity of your punishment.” The strange girl with fire eyes told him, and despite himself he shivered.

He would not let a girl with only half a dozen men around her to frighten him. “Get rid of them.” He ordered, but as his troops moved to do just that...

Later, head fuzzy with phantom/remembered pain and alcohol and the slight touch of Nadai—in miniscule amounts, it was a wonderful painkiller—he reflected on how he had scoffed at Kan Su-jin’s belief in an old myth. If Kouka is hiding monsters like that, maybe he wasn’t completely crazy, believing in a stupid myth...

With a brief hesitation, Yona strapped her sword to her waist in easier reach then on her back with her bow and quiver. Having used the chaos the others generated in Sen’s ranks to cross the field, they were near the cluster of Fire Tribe troops around their treacherous general.

Yona narrowed her eyes when she saw, as they drew closer, Kan Su-jin beheaded a soldier for something. “SURRENDER?!?!?! IMPOSSIBLE!!!! I AM THE DESCENDANT OF HIRYUOU-OU! I WILL NOT BOW TO A FALSE KING!!!!! IF YOU ARE TRUE MEMBERS OF THE FIRE TRIBE, THEN GIVE UP YOUR LIFE TO FIGHT FOR YOUR KING!!!!! IT WILL NOT END UNTIL THAT IMPOSTER’S BLOOD STAINS MY SWORD!!!!”

She had quite enough of listening to the ravings of an angry, petty man. “Pull back your troops.” She commanded, the dragons taking up guard positions around her. “General Su-jin.”

“So you are still alive.” Not for long.

Her late grandfather may have been one of his childhood friends, true enough, but age changed both of them. He had clearly lost his senses in the end, wanting Il to succeed him until the girl before him was old enough. I am a blood descendant of Hiryuu-ou; that matters more the hair color of someone who in all likelihood is a bastard child. He thought, not flat-out ignoring her words, but not *listening* to them either.

“A little girl thinks to lecture *me*?” Su-jin said, incredulous. “Right now, as Hiryuu-ou, I am taking back what is rightfully mine: Hiryuu Castle. My soldiers will gladly form—”

“You really think the name of Hiryuu-ou is just something you can claim?” Yona cut him off and pushed the hood of her cloak back.

The dragons shared looks as whispers and mutterings from the troops filled the air, all commenting how her hair color. Yona’s torch inside had flared into a bonfire.
She was enraged.

Su-jin sneered as he dismounted. “I have a far better claim to it than a foolish, spoiled, girl.” The way he said the word ‘girl’ made it clear he meant something entirely different. “As a descendant of—“

“There are untold numbers of people who could claim descent in every Tribe, not just Fire.” She cut him off again. “But with the records destroyed, no one really knows anymore. That makes all of Kouka the children of Hiryuu-ou.”

She unsheathed her sword, the ringing of metal as she withdrew it filling everyone’s ears. “Your initial crime is enough to warrant death. But colluding with a foreign nation, to overthrow your liege lord? Destroying your Tribe from within by sucking up all resources for your army?” Everyone was quietly terrified, watching her slowly and steadily close the distance between them.

There was the sense of an enraged dragon hovering over everyone, as she cast her judgment. “You are not fit to lead anyone. Not your Tribe, and certainly not this kingdom.”

Suddenly she darted forward, and only the restraining Dragon’s Hand on his shoulder kept Hak back. Su-jin raised his sword to strike her down, and then there was a crimson-haired man in her place, wearing armor much like Hiryuu-ou was always shown wearing in the sketches. The vision stunned him, and when the image changed back her, it was too late.

Later, some would say that it had been the missing-presumed-dead Crown Princess Yona that killed him. Others swore Hiryuu-ou had returned to strike the treacherous Kan Su-jin down for his actions.

But all agreed that the person had crimson hair.

Su-jin fell to his knees, bleeding heavily from a diagonal slash across his torso, still alive. The inferno that was Yona-Hiryuu-Crimson Dragon stood before him, and her voice clearly carried over the field, all the way up to a dumbfounded Su-won and Ju-do, who arrived as her sword connected and Su-jin fell to his knees. “For colluding with a foreign nation with the intent to overthrow your sovereign, your sentence is death.”

She leaned in close, to whisper the next bit to Su-jin. “I cast you out of the Fire, Kan Su-jin.” There was a peculiar overlap to the words, like there was another person speaking with her. “May the fire that once sheltered you char your soul to ash, for daring to claim My name.”

Then her face changed to that of the crimson haired man from before.

Hiryuu-ou’s face.

*That fool Ju-nam was right!* Kan Su-jin, General of the Fire Tribe, thought as his body went numb and the ground rose up to meet him.

Twisting her fingers into his hair, Yona raised the head of Kan Su-jin for all to see. “Your General has been killed. Will you take up his cause?” She turned her head to look up at Su-won. “Be sure in your decision, for your King is watching.”

Somehow, Su-won very much doubted that the King she was referring to was him.

One soldier bravely edged forward. He opened his mouth and paused, not sure how to address her. “My Lord…what would you have us do?”

“Surrender to Sky and Earth forces. For Fire to recover from the ashes and blaze bright again, every person is needed, in any and all capacity.” She ordered.
He could see a young person come up and pull her hood back up as the troops, as one, bowed, then turned and formed up to go and surrender, leaving behind two headless bodies. Kan Su-jin, and the soldier he beheaded for daring to suggest retreat. Yona carefully placed his head on his back. “I doubt his sons are involved. For them I will permit an honorable burial.”

Suddenly there was the sense of a dark fire surrounding him, as a cloaked figure holding an unusually familiar weapon turned in his direction.

Yona laid a hand on his arm, and said something to him. The dark fire retreated, and they went to engage the Sen troops along with the people with them.

Su-won might have had a couple lingering doubts about the truth of what Yona had written, but this act dispelled them. “Your Majesty…” Ju-do said, trailing off.

“It’s her, Ju-do.” Su-won replied, answering the unspoken question. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“It seems like the foolish girl everyone took her for never existed.” Ju-do remarked, shifting in the saddle. “That, or she’s grown up remarkably fast.”

Sen soldiers started flying through the air, a figure raining metal down on them from above as Hak flung soldiers away with one of Yona’s new—

...new friends.

_It’s only been three months, yet they fight like they’ve fought a thousand battles._ Whomever they were, they were united with Hak in guarding Yona, even the pretty youth from before, despite being weaponless. He stood in front of her with outstretched arms, and she jerked him behind her, into the center of the group, a blonde youth with a shield in front of both of them.

“So I heard some weird group started fighting the Sen troops?” Guen-Tae asked as he rode up, his blood humming with the thrill of battle. _I haven’t had this much fun since fighting Mundok’s brat in that tournament._

His joy was lost as he joined Su-won and Ju-do at staring in amazement. _Holy shit!!! It’s like something out of the birth myth!!_ There was a cloaked figure with an unusual weapon, tossing soldiers away like they were wooden figures, and nearby…

A flash of red, and an arrow flew, hitting a man in the throat. Stunned by the feats of the group before him, he yanked it out, only to fall to the ground, blood spraying in the air.

_She’s good._ Guen-Tae acknowledged, as another arrow flew, hitting another man in the eye. The flashes of red continued, and with how the figure with the unusual and familiar weapon hovered…

Guen-Tae had the rumor that had started floating around among the more stupid courtiers, of how Hak had killed King Il and kidnapped Crown Princess Yona, which was bullshit. The only thing that exceeded Hak’s loyalty to King Il was his devotion and love of the princess. Guen-Tae wouldn’t pretend to understand what in Il that Hak found worthy of loyalty, but when it came to the princess…

_He’d sooner kill himself than hurt her. And killing her father would most definitely count as hurting her._ Guen-Tae forced himself to stop that train of thought, because it would only lead to the speculating he had told himself he wouldn’t do until he knew anything more certain.

“…Should we capture them?” Ju-do asked tentatively.
“Probably just bandits caught up in the fight. No point in capturing them.” Guen-Tae weighed in, somehow containing his whistle as the bow-wielding, red-flashing girl drew a sword and struck down a soldier with his eye set on a weaponless youth.

“Your Majesty, the Fire Tribe soldiers who surrendered to us, they said… they said General Kan Su-jin was killed.” A soldier spoke up.

“I can’t claim to be overly heartbroken over such a result.” Guen-Tae remarked, watching as the group of ‘bandits’ retreat, the man who had to be Son Hak sweeping soldiers out of his way with a figure whose arm looked… strange.

And a lot like the images of the founder of the Earth Tribe.

Once the Sen Province forces were in retreat, and the Fire Tribe troops contained, Yona’s legs gave out.

The only reason she didn’t hit the ground was Hak swooped her up in his arms. “Minna… daijoubu?”

“Un. Shinpai shinai de.” Hak’s voice was soft as he answered, a strange lilt in his voice, much like what was in Yona’s voice earlier, as she cursed Kan Su-jin.

There would be plenty of questions to answer later, as there was no way to keep dodging the dragon in the group, but, for now…

Yun started fussing over them as they reached where they had left the horses. Thankfully they hadn’t been spooked, or stolen, or they’d have lost all of their supplies. “We need to put some distance between us and here before you can fuss over us Yun.” Hak reminded him. “Everyone alive enough to handle being on a horse?”

With groans of varying degrees, everyone found their way onto a horse, and left the battlefield behind.

Yona’s hand stayed fisted in Hak’s robes throughout.

_**So you’ve beaten me to Fire as well. Su-won thought, eyeing the fields that were recently tilled and planted. How can I make Kouka a better place for you, when all I can do is follow your footsteps?**_

The change in Kan Tae-Jun was remarkable, and his new attitude had spread among his men, becoming the most positive interaction between Fire Tribe troops and civilians in decades. _**Maybe I should make doing laundry a training exercise; I never realized just how hard scrubbing cloth could be, let alone dealing with baskets of wet clothes and sheets.**_

To be honest, he was having a little trouble picturing Yona here, doing laundry, tending to the sick, and cooking.

The Yona he had thought he’d known anyway. The Yona he’d met in Awa, with those ancient eyes?

All too easily.

With an internal sigh, he mounted his horse. If he remembered the map correctly, the village closest to the border on Sen’s side was Senri. Maybe he could learn more about those Iza seeds there.
The young women of Senri Village were besides themselves, with another group of handsome men visiting in such a short time span. Sure, most of them looked to be soldiers, and the one not dressed as a soldier had to be a noble of some importance.

Still, there was no harm in looking.

“It’s a pity you’ve missed our Fire-Quelling Festival.” Aro told the man who was an important noble at the very least. “An entertainment troupe was visiting, and their dancer was amazing! I still don’t know why she wanted to dance with a sword, but it definitely made the dance more impactful.”

“Perhaps I’ll have the chance to see them perform for myself.” The man commented. “Especially if the dancer is as good as you say.”

Something about him reminds me of Yona. Aro thought, watching as the noble asked her grandfather all sorts of questions about Iza seeds, a soldier with a scarred cheek hovering nearby.

The frustration flowing off of him was impressive, yet seemed resigned, like this was something his charge always did, no matter how much it annoyed him.

The girls sighed as the group moved on. “If only they could have stayed longer!!!” Was the general theme of their complaints.

Aro found herself where she had spied on Yona and Hak, and flushed as she remembered what Yona had said. “Head out of the clouds Aro.” She told herself firmly. “You’ll never see either of them again, and there’s no point pondering on what will never happen.”

“Did you hear about Kyo-ga-sama becoming the new Fire General?” One recovering soldier asked another.

“Yeah…would have thought the whole family would have been executed and someone completely new be appointed.” The other soldier remarked. “Then again, it’s not like the King’s forces killed General Su-jin.”

“…that group, on the battlefield…it was like the legends of Hiryyuu-ou and the Dragon Warriors had come to life.” The soldier mused. “Regardless of if it was Yona-hime or Hiryyuu-ou’s specter who killed General Su-jin…he was not pleased.”

“You sure you weren’t hit on the head? Just because the old General was killed by someone with red hair doesn’t make that person Hiryyuu-ou OR Yona-hime. Never mind how no one can decide if this person was a man or a woman.” His partner in recovery complained.

The first soldier stayed quiet, closing his eyes in pretend sleep. You wouldn’t be so doubtful if you had been there to see it. With that sense of an enraged dragon hanging over my head, filled with fire…

…could it really have been anyone else?

Chapter End Notes

I hope Kan Su-jin's death was to everyone's liking. I want to hear your reactions!!!!
In his biography of Edward III, Ian Mortimer figured out how practically the whole of England could be a descendant of him by the present day, since he had twelve legitimate children, six of whom sired heirs, and at least three illegitimate children. Even if the first three generations of Hiryuu’s line were monogamous and/or only had one or two children, I think after two thousand plus years it’s entirely likely for a large portion of Kouka could likely be descended from Hiryuu-ou. The full title is Edward III: The Perfect King by Ian Mortimer.

Kind of touching how Su-jin said he was Hiryuu-ou because a young Tae-Jun asked if he’d be Hiryuu-ou as the head of the Fire Tribe, but he’s still a traitor.

I’m several dozen cross-stitch kits behind, so most of my free time that I had been using for this is going to those. It’s bad luck to sew on Sunday, so that’s now my writing/typing day.
“Did you really have to do that?” Yona asked Hiryuu, arms crossed.

“It worked.” He protested. “Besides, all of us were furious, so it would have done more harm to not go along with it.”

“I’m surprised it hasn’t ached, when the fire blazes.” She remarked.

“I think your body is along the lines of a Dragon Warrior, since when we reincarnated, our main goal was that the fire would not harm you the way it had us.” Dragon-them explained. “Only your power is spiritual. The two of you may be human, but our core is still that of a Dragon God. The average human body couldn’t cope with that, which killed us the first time. What else that may mean for us, as time goes on…”

“Is that why Zeno become able to see Kaya and the others after he began visiting?” She asked.

“I think so. And why Yun has become able to see them as well.” Hiryuu answered.

“You all saw that, right?” Kija asked the next day.

He looked over to Yona, latched onto Hak, still asleep…or unconscious. “Hiryuu-ou-sama returned to punish Kan Su-jin.”

“What’s more important is what she told that guy right before she took his head off.” Jaeha reminded Kija. “You could only just hear it, but…”

“What she told him, at the end, is the traditional curse of the Fire Tribe. When someone is executed for high treason, and is from the Fire Tribe, they are cast out of the Tribe right before.” Yun explained.

Further conversation was cut off as Yona groaned. Everyone huddled around her and Hak as she opened her eyes. Rubbing them, she asked, “Is everyone alright?” She spoke carefully, as if she was checking the words as she said them.

“Are you alright, Hime-sama? You’re the one who passed out.”

“Asks the walking bandage.” Jaeha deadpanned.

She sat up, and Ao was pressing nuts into her hands. “How long was I out?”

“A day. Ah, Hime-sama, when you…” Kija trailed off.

“How long have you known? About having been Hiryuu-ou?” Jaeha asked bluntly.

“…I’ve always known. My whole life, I’ve had to be careful, and not lose track of what was ‘me’ and what was ‘him’. It’s better now, with the fire actually burning now, but…”

She stood, a little unsteady, and bowed low to a stunned Kija and Jaeha. “I still said nothing, which is a disservice to both of you, and I’m sorry. Should either of you wish to leave because of it, I will not stop you.”
“Wait, we’re the only ones to *not* know?” Jaeha asked, not even bothering to try fighting the urge that had him helping Yona sit back down and kept him hovering.

“She remembered this.” Zeno fingered his amulet with a fond smile. “Hiryuu-ou gave Ouryuu this, all those years ago. No matter what happens, it’s always returns to Ouryuu.”

There was something bittersweet about how he said this.

“Kija, please sit down before you fall down.” Yona scolded gently.

Everyone was hovering. She was in Hak’s lap, Jaeha to her left, Kija finally sitting down to her right. Shin-ah, Zeno, and Yun were crouched or sitting in front of her.

“It was fear, what kept me silent to the two of you.” She admitted. “With Kija, he has centuries of expectations and longing, and I’m worried about my ability to live up to all of that. With Jaeha…I’m afraid you’ll leave. I won’t stop you, if you do, but I’m selfish enough to want to keep you. All of you.”

Chewing her lip, she began explaining what she had learned and figured out. “When the Crimson Dragon God descended, there was a split, and the end result was a dragon self and a human self. Instead of reincarnating like a regular human soul, there was a…realignment, resulting in a dragon self, a male self, and a new, female self. For all that we became human by descending, our soul is still that of a dragon god. Back then, the fire was wrapped up tight, inside of a regular human body, meaning that when it ran free, when he was enraged, it shortened his life as a human. This time…it was like a brazier of nearly dead charcoal, until I reached a point where it could blaze fully to life. I suppose I could be technically called the Crimson Dragon Warrior…”

“Okay, you can’t tell me Hak’s past life wasn’t important to Hiryuu-ou, given what they’re like now.” Jaeha protested, as Yun pressed a bowl of soup on Yona.

“Think about it, it’ll hit you.” Hak said flatly, Yona hiding a smile in her yawn.

Quiet reigned while they thought about it and she ate, despite her overall lack of appetite. Yona still felt like she could doze back off at any moment, but then they got it, given how Kija’s eyes went wide and Jaeha looked at Hak intently.

“You’d been a girl previously!?” Kija questioned.

“That’s what you’re focusing on?” Hak grumbled.

“No wonder the two of you moved so fast!” Jaeha exclaimed.

“Hime-san didn’t tell me, either. I figured it out on my own. Not that there weren’t hints, like calling me Ha-kun when we met.” Hak explained.

“Why are you a girl this time anyway? Flip of a coin?” Jaeha asked. *No wonder Hak is beautiful… but this makes me wonder what Hiryuu-ou really looked like.*

“Ha-kun’s pregnancy wasn’t very easy, on her or the castle. When she went into labor, she demanded hi-Hiryuu stay and watch the whole thing. At one point she swore that in the next life she’d get him pregnant so he could see how well he could handle it. Knowing exactly who was in charge, he agreed.” Yona answered, inciting chaos.

“YOU DIDN’T MENTION THAT!!!!” Hak yelled, flushing bright red all the way down his neck. “You just said he’d promised to be a girl in the next life!!!!”
“Doesn't that mean you were practically guaranteed to get together with Hak?” Yun asked.

“Not really. There was still a chance that we would never meet in this life. The truly binding vow was the one Hiryuu made his adoptive mother, as she laid bleeding out from stopping an assassin after him; that in the next life, he would be their child by blood as well as by heart.” Yona explained, through yawns that grew more and more frequent. “But seriously, how is everyone doing?”

“P-perfectly fine, Hime-sama!” Kija stuttered out, and Yun jabbed him in the side to counter his claim.

“You need to pace yourself Kija. Use up all your strength at the start and you’ll die.” Jaeha reminded him.

“If it meant protecting Hime-sama, then I’d gladly die.” Kija replied.

“No one’s dying for me!” Yona countered sternly.

“Still, it’s kind of amazing Hak and Zeno ended up with so few injuries.” Jaeha noted, mostly eyeing Zeno, who was dirty yet apparently uninjured. Huh…I would have sworn I saw him get hit a few times, despite the shield he was using, but there’s no blood. Then again, with all the chaos of the battle, what was a hit from my view might not have been in reality.

“Zeno cheered on everyone!”

“He stuck by me and Yona, and kept us safe. He did a great job at it too…thank you.” Yun said.

“It makes Zeno bashful to be depended on!” He said with a head scratch. He hadn’t expected Yun to comment on it.

“I really wasn’t depending on you.” Yun countered flatly.

Kija was the first to approach her after the reveal. It was shortly after dinner. “Ah, Hiryu—Hime-sama—“ He stuttered.

She held out a hand. “I’m still ‘me’ Kija; you can treat me like you always do, and address me like always as well.”

Placing his hand in hers, he let himself be pulled into a sitting position next to her. “Why didn’t you say something, when you came for me?” He blurted out.

Did you not trust me?

“When the time came to be reborn, he had expected a clean slate. The plan, the expectation, was that I would have had no knowledge of my past life. But it didn’t work out that way. Instead of never feeling him, I always have, which meant it was hard to tell what was ‘Yona’ and what was ‘Hiryuu’. I worried about having an identity and a self separate from him. That Night…the fire lit, and I established who ‘Yona’ was in relation to ‘Hiryuu’. When I came for you…I’m scared of failing to live up to generations of expectations and longing. Because as much as we are a part of each other, Hiryuu and Yona…he didn’t return from the dead.”

“Hime-sama…” He whispered.

Slowly, he wrapped his human arm around her shoulders, pulling her to lean on him. Her hand fisted in his shirt as he thought about how to respond. ‘I’d be lying if I said that I never imagined what my
master would be like.” He began. “But...I don’t recall having any specific expectations, in regards to
my master. Just hoping that I would be the one to serve. I think I had dreamed of my master, with
both of us as children in a snowy field—“

“So you do remember the dreams.” She commented quietly, pulling back to look at his face.

“That was you!!!” He exclaimed. “It had just been a feeling, that the girl in the dreams was my
master.”

“Before I was conceived, he visited all of you, so he could see what the latest generation of Dragon
Warriors was like. So I was able to find all of you in dreams. Between me wanting to connect to you
as a friend, and your own desire for a friend who didn’t treat you differently, I didn’t think you really
remembered them.” She explained.

“I think the only expectation my village and I had was that one day, all of the waiting and longing
would be fulfilled.” Kija conceded. “Hime—Yona, the dragon’s blood may have formed the bond
between us, between the Crimson Dragon God and the White Dragon Warrior, but I, as Kija, serve
you, Yona. Not Hiryuu-ou-sama.”

Yona leaned up and kissed his cheek, making him blush. “Thank you, Kija. Hopefully this winter
it’ll snow enough for all of us to have a snowball fight for real. Even if Jaeha will cheat.” She said
this last part with a pout.

“...can you tell me about him, the first Hakuryuu?” He asked. “It doesn’t have to be now.”

“His name was Guen. He was the son of him-me’s nurse, Yun-an, and he was like an older brother.
He was...four? Years older than Hiryuu. I’m pretty sure Yun is descended from Guen’s sister, Yun-
mei, so the two of you are very distant cousins.” She answered.

“Why do you call Hiryuu-ou-sama ‘him-me’?” Kija asked. It seems to be at odds with her insistence
at keeping herself separate from him.

“When I was little, I didn’t really know or understand what reincarnation was. I knew Hiryuu was
me, and I was Hiryuu, so ‘him-me’ felt right. Now...it’s part habit, part a reflection of how the two
of us, plus dragon-us—the dragon we had been—make up the Crimson Dragon God.” Yona
explained.
started, but didn’t pull away.

“…we good?” He turned to look at her when she asked that, but she was still turned away from him.

Was he still pissed off about being kept in the dark?

A little.

But he couldn’t bring himself to hold that against her.

Not how it was fueled by a fear of losing anyone else, no matter the cause.

Shuffling around, he hugged her from behind, the way he’d hold her in the dreams when she was a child and he a teenager. He couldn’t deny how something inside eased, holding her like this.

“We’re good.”

Su-won stared at Yona’s book, as he thought back to the battle. He could never have imagined her striking down anyone, but now she had at least two kills: Yan Kum-ji and Kan Su-jin, and likely several Sen Province soldiers. The Fire Tribe soldiers she ordered to surrender could not make up their minds, as to if it was Yona or Hiryuu-ou’s specter that killed Kan Su-jin. I wonder if it’s something similar to the reports of a crimson dragon striking down Kum-ji?

Prepping his ink, he dove back into this tale of the ancient past, a tale he had taken for myth that turned out to be memories of a life long ago.

The dragon gods stared, dumbfounded, at their now mortal brother. ‘What do you mean, ‘no’!? ’

White and Green demanded together.

“Exactly what I said; no. I will not allow you to destroy them.”

‘Have you lost your pride as a dragon god?’ Blue asked, puzzled. ‘Humans have turned their backs to us. You kneel on what would have been your execution platform and still you tell us no?’

Fire flared in Hiryuu’s eyes. “My pride is perfectly intact. Do you really expect humans to keep worshiping gods that do not even listen to their prayers, let alone answer them? This place stands on what had been a shrine, to the Crimson Dragon God, and women would come and pray for children. And. I. Never. Knew. But that is not the reason.”

‘Then what is?’ Yellow spoke.

“I, too, am human now. Even if they hate me, and betray me…I cannot stop my love for them, not only the ones near and dear to my heart, but all of them. If you destroy them regardless of my wishes, then you will destroy me as well.” He stood. “I have made my choice, brothers. Now what is yours?”

Silence.

‘Clearly, letting you do this, unsupervised and unchaperoned, was a bad idea.’ Blue said drily, after several minutes.

‘Since we cannot forcibly take you back with us, then we’ll just have to make sure you don’t wind up in over your head again.’ White said.
There was a strange feeling, and he knew his brothers were flicking through his memories, looking for something.

At least White, Blue, and Green were. Yellow, while he appeared to be watching, was in fact looking east.

‘We will each choose a person, to be Our other half here on Earth, bound to you by the blood of the dragons. They will gain a portion of Our power, and shall serve as your arms, legs, eyes, and body.’ His brothers spoke as one.

Before he could protest, and demand to know just what they were thinking, each shot off in a different cardinal direction.

The White Dragon God had the shortest trek, for his choice, Guen, was on the other side of the courtyard from Hiryuu, to the north, having not made much progress towards him. ‘I seek someone to act in my stead here on Earth to protect my brother. By drinking the dragon’s blood, you will become a dragon warrior, and bear the power of the White Dragon God.’ He told Guen.

“I have sworn to guard Hiryuu-sama to my last breath. If the dragon’s blood and power will aid me in that endeavor, then I accept.” Guen told the White Dragon God with a bow.

The Blue Dragon God went west, to where Abi stood pacing outside his family’s compound. “I hope my warning got there in time…” He muttered to himself.

He was jolted from his pacing and musings when the Blue Dragon God appeared before him. ‘Your warning arrived a hair too late to help my brother. But there is a way for you to help him still. Drink my blood, and become a dragon warrior with the power of the Blue Dragon God.’ He informed Abi.

Normally, Abi would have begged for time to think it over, but something told him there wasn’t time for that. “…if it means being able to help Hiryuu-sama more effectively in the future, then I will accept your power.” Abi said, staring up into the eyes of the Blue Dragon God.

The Green Dragon God went south, to where Shuten was traveling with a small group of his mercenaries, heading north. He was ahead of the others when the Green Dragon God arrived. ‘My brother was an idiot and nearly got himself killed. I need someone to act in my place here on Earth, as the idiot can’t be left unsupervised.’ He said to Shuten without preamble.

“What makes you think I’m that person? I’m not keen on babysitting.” Shuten asked with a glare. “Not to mention you’ll likely bind me to him.”

‘He still managed to impress you. There are worse things and people to be bound to.’ The Green Dragon God pointed out. ‘So will you drink the dragon’s blood and become a dragon warrior with the power of the Green Dragon God?’

“…fine…” Shuten grumbled.

The Yellow Dragon God went east. Zeno was heading west to the castle, to ask Hiryuu for help with bandits harassing the local farmers, when the Yellow Dragon God appeared. ‘I seek someone to act in my place here on Earth to protect my brother. Will you accept the dragon’s blood I am offering, and become the dragon warrior of the Yellow Dragon God?’ He asked, despite being certain of the
“A dragon warrior? Me?” Zeno questioned with a blink. “But I’m not any kind of fighter or veteran; I could never become something even resembling a warrior. But…” He paused, considering. “…if even someone like me…can make this world, and everyone in it, a little bit happier, then…”

Zeno looked the Yellow Dragon God in the eye. “…that dragon’s blood…give it to me.”

Whatever his brothers were doing, he could feel when it took effect, his dragon self cringing at his brothers’ pain. Through the pain he felt from them, he heard them speak together:

**Warriors of the Four Dragons**

*From now on, you are our other halves*

With Hiryuu as your master, protect him, love him, and never betray him

*For as long as you live!*

The heavy clouds that had been lingering all day parted, revealing an afternoon sun. “What the hell did you do?” He whispered.

“Hiryuu-sama!” Turning, it took a moment to realize it was Guen running to him. His hair had been bleached white, and his right hand and arm was covered in white scales, while the hand itself looked more like a dragon’s claw.

“Guen?!” He climbed down from the platform, barely noticing that the aches he’d gained from his struggles earlier were gone, along with the burning ache his fire had left.

“What the—are you alright?”

Skidding to a stop, Guen bowed. “Yes, Hiryuu-sama.”

He scowled. “Stop that! What has my white brother done?!”

“I accepted his offer of my own free will. As for what it means…” Guen rubbed his changed arm. “…he called it the arm of Hakuryuu-kami. And I can feel others; blue, green, and yellow. But who they are, I don’t know. They are all heading here.”

“I guess all we can do is start cleaning up.” Hiryuu took in the chaos, his men, having been emboldened by the appearance of his brothers, subduing those of Yuhon’s men who were not charred to dust.

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I know this is super fast to be updating, but most of this chapter's scenes had already been written; just needed to add a few things to make it flow and order. Even if I'd been kind of hoping for more of a response on Kan Su-jin's death...

Is it sad a goal I have for my fanfiction is to get a recommendation on tvtropes.com? Or
my own page? Cuz the Yona fanfiction recommendations are really thin...
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“So the Dragon Warriors were real too…” Su-won mused, looking over the part he had just translated. “Why do I feel like those people with her and Hak in the battle the other day were them? But were they reincarnated too, or was there a bloodline?”

“I see the learning curve is going to be a little steep.” Hiryuu commented to himself, as Guen went to help some men with cleaning up the destruction his brothers had inadvertently caused and wound up flinging them away by accident when he was able to lift the whole twenty foot beam of wood by himself.

There was the sound of something hitting—crashing—into stone, followed by a string of increasingly inventive curses. Running over to the source, his jaw dropped. “Shuten?!”

The man’s once black hair had turned a forest green, and his right leg was bare, revealing green scales and a clawed foot. “…are you alright?” He could only ask, as Shuten’s curses trailed off and he stood.

“You were picked?!” Guen exclaimed as he joined them. “You’re about the last person I’d expect to be picked, let alone actually accept!”

“…can we save the fighting until later?” His voice was close to a whine as the pair of new dragon warriors glared at each other. “As in, when the castle isn’t going to come down around us and you can fight outside the walls later?”

Grumbling, each stalked away. Sighing, he shivered and realized he was getting cold. “I should get some clothes on…”

Once dressed and warm, and having been ambushed by Yun-an and Yun-mei and fussed over, he went to the pile of heads. Guen was there, staring at his father’s head. “I’m sorry Guen.” He said as he drew close.

“What was Yuhon thinking, doing something like this?” Guen wondered, not really paying attention to what he said. “Ah, I had some men go out to look for…the bodies…”

“They’re five miles to the north-west.” Abi’s voice came from behind him.

Taking in his new, radically different appearance, he and Guen could only gape.

Abi’s medium brown hair was now a sky blue, and his pale blue eyes were now golden, with slit pupils.

Dragon’s eyes.

“How much stranger are we going to get?” Shuten asked as he wandered over to meet the latest arrival.

“I guess this means I’m the last to arrive?” Zeno nearly tripped over himself as he ran full tilt to them, barely managing to not crash into the others.
“Talk about a letdown.” Shuten grumbled, earning him a glare from Hiryuu and Abi.

Zeno didn’t appear any different. The only visible change was that his once brown eyes were now blue.

Next came two thuds behind him, and strangled cursing. Turning, Hiryuu just slapped a hand over his face.

Abi and Shuten were both on the ground, paralyzed. Somehow Shuten was able to spit out his cursing, reaching new heights of inventiveness and profanity. Much to his shock, Abi was muttering curses of his own. “He…didn’t mention…me being paralyzed…too…fucking dragon god…”

Zeno flushed at bit at the language. “Ouryuu-kami just said I was the ‘indestructible shield’, but I’m not feeling very shield-like.”

Hiryuu sighed as Guen and Zeno moved to pick up Abi and Shuten and get them inside. “And my brothers were saying I shouldn’t be left unsupervised…more like I needed to supervise whatever they were planning…”

Abi and Shuten both regained movement the next afternoon. “I suppose my power is of limited use against another Dragon Warrior…” Abi mused, writing down what had happened.

“Joy…” Shuten drawled.

There was the sound of falling stone (becoming depressingly familiar), and the alarmingly unfamiliar sound of Guen screaming in panic. “OURYUU!!”

Running to the source of the noise, he could only stare open-mouthed at the hole going through two thick stone walls.

And laying on a pile of rubble, dazed, was Zeno. “ZENO!” He ran through the holes to him, somehow not tripping.

Guen was already hovering and fussing. “Oww…” Zeno whined as Abi and Shuten arrived. “I am NEVER waking you up again.”

“Don’t move; there could be damage to the spine.” Abi said sternly, making Guen panic even more.

“Can I do the ‘don’t move’ thing someplace that’s NOT a pile of stone?” Zeno complained. “I don’t think anything’s broken…”

“Hakuryuu, pick him up carefully.” Abi ordered, leading the way to Zeno’s room.

Everyone hovered and crowded the bed as Abi poked and prodded. The back of his tunic was ripped, and there was a hint of a pattern of scales on his skin. “Whatever your power is, it looks like it needs some kind of impact or injury to trigger.” Abi commented as the pattern of scales smoothed out. “Now what happened?”

“I went to wake Hakuryuu up and I got punched through two walls. So I am never doing that again.” Zeno explained, Guen nodding furiously in agreement.

“Wouldn’t the fact that it didn’t hurt you make you the best candidate to wake him up?” Shuten asked. “It’s not like your power seems to be useful.”

“SHUTEN!!!!” Hiryuu scolded, feeling a headache budding behind his eyes. Why do I get the
feeling that keeping the peace between my dragons is going to be worse than keeping the peace between the clan leaders?

“Somehow, I’m reminded of interactions between the generals, when they’re out of the public eye, in this last bit.” Su-won commented, a sweat drop forming as he pictured trying to keep peace between four people with supernatural powers.

Tidying his desk, he retired for the night.

He was back in the courtyard with the old stone bench. The crimson haired man—Hiryuu-ou—was sitting on it. “So your mind’s accepted what your heart already knew?” He remarked, holding out a hand in silent invitation.

Slowly, Su-won sat down. “I…why doesn’t she know if she wants to kill me?”

“Do you want to her to?” Hiryuu-ou countered. “One act of cruelty does not negate a lifetime of kindness.”

Su-won didn’t know how to response. Hiryuu-ou smiled kindly. “As long as you continue to care for Kouka, killing you would mean nothing, and betrays insecurity to other nations. And…”

Su-won jumped as fingers interlaced with his. “…she still loves you.”

“So what do all of you think?” Jaeha asked.

Everyone but Yun was awake when he came back from his talk with Yona.

“Think of what?” Kija asked with a blink.

“What we’ve learned. About Yona-chan and Hak.”

“The miss is still the miss and mister is still mister.” Zeno remarked.

“…she had told me…when she was explaining why…I have the Eyes…and why someone with them is always born to someone in my village…” Shin-ah revealed. “Not about Hak though.”

“But knowing what I do now, it makes sense why she said that if I was truly opposed to her goals and serving her, to say so, when she came for me.” Kija said, thinking back to the ancient eyes she had when she told him this.

“I guess I’m a little mad about not being told, even if I understand her reasons.” Jaeha admitted.

Kija stood in the snowy field, for once as an adult. The man he had seen when Hime-sama killed Kan Su-jin stood in front of him. “It’s good to meet you as myself.” Hiryuu-ou-sama greeted him with a smile. “But please don’t be in a rush to die for her, for us. Even if the power is passed on, you cannot be replaced as a person.”

“O-of course, Hiryuu-ou-sama!” Kija replied, feeling his face grow warm as Hiryuu-ou-sama’s smile made his heart do the same weird things Hime-sama’s smile did.

“I don’t know why such longing built up in the line of Hakuryuu.” This statement made Kija blink. “Then again, Guen’s father’s line had been guards for generations. Without a master to serve and
Jaeha stood on the bluff overlooking the cliff where the senju herb grew. “Wow, that’s really narrow and high.” A man who could only be Hiryyou-ou commented, eyeing the ledge with squinted eyes.

“Is there a reason for this?” Jaeha asked.

Hiryyou-ou blinked. “Do I need a reason to come meet you as myself? Especially since we both know you won’t be leaping to the horizon over this.”

Jaeha wasn’t sure if ‘we both’ referred to Yona and Hiryyou-ou, or himself and Hiryyou-ou. “Why does the dragon’s blood cause such troublesome feelings?” He muttered to himself.

“I know to some degree the blood carries the feelings of love between all of my brothers and myself, but it wouldn’t make you want to have sex with Yona, or fall in love with her.” Hiryyou-ou said calmly.

Jaeha choked at hearing the mythical Hiryyou-ou mention sex. Hiryyou-ou was visibly fighting laughter. “So you can’t keep blaming everything on the dragon’s blood.”

Zeno laid on the ground looking up at the stars. His head was in a familiar lap, while fingers ran through his hair. “Ou-sama.”

“Zeno.” As much as he was Yona’s dragon, he had been Hiryyu’s first, and a pulse of old affection and warmth came over him. “I’m sorry. I should have insisted my brothers tell me what they were planning. To all of you.”

“The miss apologized already.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t or shouldn’t apologize as myself.” Hiryyu insisted. “But I suppose there’s nothing I could have done to stop Yellow Brother, since you already felt like him.”

“I think he thought he would be dominate, once we merged. But it didn’t work out like that.” Zeno remarked. “At least, one day, we can all be in Heaven together.”

“Now, as we’re all aware, we are utterly broke.” Yun declared several days later.

Everyone was mostly healed from the battle, and had followed Yun into the nearby town, where they were having their annual market fair. “We can hunt for meat, and gather wild plants to some degree, but we still need money for things like rice, salt, clothes, bandages, weapons, and occasional stays in an inn. Thus here we are. So go out and bring back customers, or you don’t get to eat.” He ordered.

“What happened to not wanting us to stand out?” Hak asked.

“Normally I would want to not stand out. But in a market like this, with dozens of vendors competing for customers, standing out is how we can draw in customers.” Yun replied.

“It’s mean of Yun to use starvation tactics on us.” Jaeha complained. “But he has a point; we wouldn’t have a way of making a living otherwise.”

“You and I could perform for money, but not everywhere would let us do that, or the local officials would take half of what we earn as the performance fee.” Yona pointed out.
“How do you draw in customers anyway?” Kija wondered.

“Watch and learn my young apprentice.” Jaeha declared with a smirk and a wink.

Going over to a pair of young ladies, Jaeha quickly had them following him back to where Yun had set up shop.

“What exactly did you do?” Kija questioned, the market being too noisy for him to really make out what Jaeha had been saying.

Noting Kija’s indignant screech at whatever Jaeha had whispered to him and Shin-ah, she approached an older man at a cloth stall. “Excuse me, sir?”

She continued once he had turned to look at her. “My brother and I came here to raise money for my wedding. Could you come look at his medicines? They’re really good!” She asked, a hint of blush on her face, completing the picture of a girl thinking about her wedding.

“He have anything for stomach problems?” The man asked.

“He has medicines for everything!”

“Why not?” With a shrug, the man followed her back to Yun, several others who had overheard the conversation also following.

By now Yun was nearly swamped with people, Zeno helping with the sales. She returned as Hak returned with his own crowd, mostly of young women. “Both of you definitely got more than one customer.” Jaeha noted with a sweat drop at the combined crowds, which numbered at over a dozen.

“Helping a pretty girl pay for her wedding? Of course I’m coming to check out the wares.” The man she had approached pointed out, getting in line.

“How about I let you hug him. Or any of his friends.”

The betrayed look turned gleeful as Kija soon had a hugging line nearly as long as Hak’s, much to Jaeha’s displeasure. Shin-ah had retreated behind Yun and Zeno. “Are you alright Shin-ah?” Yona asked as she switched places with Zeno, who skipped off in search of more ‘young women’.

“…he said three seconds…it was more than three seconds…” Yona rubbed his back in sympathy, guessing Jaeha had unmasked him to draw in customers.

“Would you ladies like some apples? They’re not the best…” The fruit seller to their left offered. “Where did you come in from?”

“We just passed through Sky Tribe lands.” Yona replied.

“How did you fare with that battle with Fire Tribe troops and Sen Province troops?” He asked.

“We managed.” Yun assured the man.

“Oh yeah, apparently there’s a new Fire General, Kan Kyo-ga. Kan Tae-Jun is the Fire Tribe Representative.” This statement made Yun choke a little on his apple.
“Hopefully this means Fire will be able to recover and become a safe place again.” Yona hoped with a gentle smile.

“I know what you mean; outside the cities there practically was no law and order in Fire this past decade.”

“Speaking of law and order…” The man hawking spices to their right started. “I’d avoid the Water Tribe for a while.”

“How come?” Zeno asked as he returned with another group of ‘young ladies’.

“I don’t know much, but there’s been a lot of weird people in town, and it’s become harder to do business. Then again, my instinct is to avoid anywhere I have poor information on.” The spice monger declared at the end.

I know where we’ll be going next…Yun thought with a mental sigh.

While Yona was distracted with customers (mostly young women asking about the wedding), Hak swapped places with Jaeha and slid up to Yun. With a sigh, Yun counted out two thousand rin, handing it to Hak. “We do have two more days of this market.” Hak reminded Yun as he accepted the money. “And the horses to sell.” He added in an undertone.

Hak wasn’t in a rush to sell the horses; if potential buyers thought he was in a rush to sell, he wouldn’t get the best price. They weren’t branded or marked as belonging to Sen, and he could easily say he came across them after the battle if their origins were questioned.

Rolling his eyes, Yun handed over another thousand rin.

“I got some spending money from Yun; want to go browse?” Hak suggested.

“Alright!” Yona said with a smile.

“Did you really have to offer up hugs?” He complained as they walked hand in hand.

“It’s not like I was offering kisses. And Kija and Jaeha got pulled in too.” She pointed out, pausing to eye a jewelry counter.

“Yeah, because you pulled them in.” He retorted, as an ivory carved snake pendant caught his eye. “We should get that for White Snake.”

“Yeah no.” A delicious smell wafted over, luring both to a grill. “So good…”

Somehow they pulled themselves away before succumbing.

This reminds me of that time all of us snuck out into Kuuto…before I was kidnapped. Yona reflected, feeling like every other young girl with her beloved as they browsed and chatted about what caught their eye. She couldn’t stop herself from running a hand over a bolt of silk.

The vendor looked uncomfortable. “Are you alright sir?” She asked.

“…my stomach isn’t agreein’ with me.” He admitted.

“My brother is selling medicines two rows over. I’m sure he’ll have something that can help.” She told him. “Between a spice monger and a fruit seller.”

Nodding, the vendor grabbed his apprentice and left the stall in his care. “We’re near the weapons,
right?” She asked the young man.

He pointed off to the right with a fierce blush.

Hak’s eyes lit up at all the sharp and pointy items on display. As he examined the swords, a flash of red drew her attention.

The red was attached to a fan. There were wisteria stenciled in purple at one end, with the tassel composed of red and purple. The fan ribs gleamed the gleam of polished steel. Picking it up, she could feel the weight of it, the tops of the ribs ending in shiny, sharp-looking points.

It was gorgeous. A perfect, unremarkable dance accessory that doubled as a weapon.

It was also expensive, just going off the appearance. Noticing her interest, the vendor came over. “A very nice choice. Would you like to hear the price?”

“No…” Setting it down with a sigh, she made herself wander to the bows, and did her best not to send longing looks its way.

The vendor couldn’t contain his jump as he turned and found Hak standing there. “How much is the tessen?” He asked in a low voice.

“Twenty thousand rin. I can go as low as ten thousand, if you’re buying for that young lady. Never seen an item so perfectly match a person; pretty yet deadly.” The vendor replied.

“That she is…” Hak debated the likelihood of getting another seven thousand rin out of Yun and decided it wasn’t likely.

“If either of you is good with a bow, there’s archery betting at the edge of the market. I can hold it until close of business tomorrow.” The vendor told Hak.

Smirking, Hak went to fetch Yona.

Chapter End Notes

Had to have Hiryuu visit the others, since Shin-ah's already met him.

And no, Yona will not be killing Hiyou, no matter how tempting the idea is.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The archery range had caught Yona’s eye by the time Hak reached her. “What are they doing?” She asked.

“Gambling. You bet on where on the target the archer will hit.” He explained. “Want to check it out?”

She nodded.

“Hey, can I enter?” Hak asked the apparent organizer and bookie as they approached.

“Sure, a spot just—“

“Oh, I’m not shooting; she is.” Hak placed his hands on Yona’s shoulders as he pushed her forward.

Stunned silence, despite the market chatter.

“HER!?”

“Can she even draw the bow?”

“No way could a little girl hit a target that small.”

“I wouldn’t even try something like that, buddy.”

“I can at least try!” Yona declared, her face flushing as she grabbed the bow from the bookie.

“Wait, she’s seriously going to try?!” The group of middle aged men were dumbfounded as she stepped up to the line.

Then the betting started.

“One thousand rin that she misses!”

“She won’t even get that far! One thousand that she can’t draw the bow!”

“Two thousand that she runs away crying!” The bookie was a little reluctant about accepting this one, but the sharp look the tall dark-haired man with the girl sent him kept him quiet.

Hak’s voice cut through the other bets (all variations of her missing and one daring soul saying she’d hit third mark, and between one and two thousand rin), “Three thousand that she hits first mark!”

“That’s the middle, right? You sure about that bro?” The bookie had to confirm the bet was serious.

“Absolutely.”

“Three thousand’s a little low if you’re that sure.” The man who bet she’d run crying remarked.

“S’all I got.” Hak said with a shrug.

Yona froze, despite herself. I’ve never shot with someone blatantly watching; this is different from
Hak spying on me at night or Abi keeping track. Or in the middle of battle.

“Hime-san, just relax” The dark fire told her.

Breathing deep, she lined up the shot...

...and hit the bullseye.

If the declaration of her shooting had caused stunned silence before, this silence was echoing.

At least, until Hak started laughing. “You idiots see that! Isn’t my young lady amazing!!!”

“WHY ARE YOU BRAGGING!!?”

“Why shouldn’t I brag about my girl?” Hak got out through his laughter as he collected his money. Fifteen thousand; more than I thought I’d get...

“That had to be a fluke, right? Sure she can draw the bow and hit the bullseye’s, but no way could she do that twice.” The man who had bet she couldn’t even draw the bow protested.

The look on Hak’s face was murderous. “Hey, Hak?” Yona called out. “Bet double or nothing.”

The bookie couldn’t quite contain his shiver as the betting started again. Talk about a terrifying pair...

Hak was sparkling as he collected his winnings for the second shot. Going double or nothing meant he now had thirty six thousand rin. “I would’ve thought you were the one shooting, based on how happy you are.” Yona commented with a smile. It’s been months since you’ve laughed like that; without the tinge of sadness. I need to try harder on making you truly laugh...

“Well, since I can’t show you off to the idiots back in the castle…” He said with a shrug, handing her half of the winnings. “You think Yun will scold us if he hears about this?”

“When he hears about it.” She corrected as Zeno popped up. “The incense you were looking for is at the other end Miss.” He said in lieu of a greeting.

“What do you need incense for?” Hak asked with a blink. Though if she goes with Zeno, I don’t have to worry about distracting her or ducking out to buy the tessen.

The torch dimmed in sadness. “...I overheard a few men talking about Father.” She said quietly. “And how Su-won’s done more in four months than Father did in ten years. I’ve been so focused on learning to survive that I…” Blinking against tears, she trailed off. “I can get the incense he liked here. With the arrow betting money I should have enough for one stick at least…”

Hak’s cheerful mood faded with this. Rubbing her eyes, Yona continued. “You go get whatever caught your eye; Zeno can go with me to buy the incense.” She told him, slipping into the crowd with Zeno before Hak quite realized she had noticed how something caught his attention.

The vendor was only a little surprised when Hak returned with eighteen thousand rin. He had glimpsed the calluses on the girl’s hands, and figured one or both of them would be good enough archers to earn some money. “It’s a pity I won’t have the chance to see this in the hands of a girl like her.” He remarked, wrapping the now folded tessen in a piece of red silk. “Although I will pray that blood never has to be drawn with it.”
“Yeah…” Hak agreed, trading the money for the now wrapped tessen.

The vendor found himself watching the young man drift off into the crowd, no doubt to return to his fiery girl—young lady—with a faint smile. Tucking the money away, he turned to the next customer.

“Ah Hime-sama, back then, well, did the dragons…” Kija trailed off with a blush. “I mean, do you remember—“

“Could Hiryuu-ou’s dragon warriors feel when he’d have sex?” Jaeha finished bluntly, finishing his share of the meat buns that was their dinner.

“No they couldn’t. Me being able to feel all of you, and you feeling me is an artifact of this time. Back then, none of them had been in his direct presence when they became Dragon Warriors, and likely they could feel each other only because my brothers arranged it that way. Their master was already chosen, so all they had needed was the power. In this generation, all of you had the power, but no master. It’s just a hunch, but you may have been ‘locked in’ as my dragons when I was born, if only to avoid the potential problem of having a new generations of dragons being too young to protect me. Since we were in each other’s auras when the awakening happened, there is more to the bond in this generation.” Yona explained. “Which was probably a good thing; Guen already had enough blackmail material from growing up with him.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Guen agreed, unnoticed and unheard by all save Yona and Zeno.

While Kaya couldn’t go far from Zeno, they were free to roam, and had been checking up on various things for Yona.

“At least I gathered enough herbs to get us through the next day of the market.” Yun commented, changing the subject. “The last day I would like to do some shopping. The vendors who traveled far to come here will be looking to sell off as much of their remaining stock as they can, so I should be able to get a bunch of supplies cheap.”

“So Su-won’s realized the truth, and the Iza seeds have taken root…” Yona murmured after Guen and Abi gave their reports. Shuten was checking on Ryokuryuu Village and Awa, and wasn’t back yet. “I’m glad Tae-Jun and his brother weren’t punished for what their father had been trying to do. Even if it means getting Kyo-ga’s vote will be harder.”

“Yeah Su-won demanded a village from Li Hazara when he went to discuss terms, which turned out to be Senri Village. He was visiting Tae-Jun to let him know about his father when he received the Iza seeds. I think he paid a few villagers from Senri to come help farmers plant and raise Iza.” Guen added. “Are you going to tell Tae-Jun what happened?”

“…before we move on I’ll have Jaeha and Zeno take a letter to him. Yun told me that the Fire General is always regarded as Hiryuu-ou by the Tribe, and I don’t want to damage things with Tae-Jun by appearing to keep this from him. He’s next in line until Kyo-ga sires an heir.” Yona decided.

“So far Su-won hasn’t breathed a word to anyone about what he’s learned. I doubt that will change, unless he decides to tell Ju-do, but I can’t say how likely that is. He hasn’t looked for the Secret Archives as far as I could tell, and I think he’ll be going to Water soon to check out the drug problem.” Abi remarked.

“With my luck I’m likely to run into him. Hopefully I can drop a hint about looking for it. I just hope there won’t be bloodshed.”
Yona knelt at the edge of the camp, her dagger on the ground in front of her with the incense she had bought and a small (tiny) incense holder. Picking up a stick, she frowned, before reaching towards the fire.

In theory, she should be able to set things on fire with her power as the Female Part of the Crimson Dragon God. Fully aware of her self, she certainly had enough personal spiritual power to pull it off.

The question was how.

Him-her had never even tried something like this, creating his body like that of a regular human’s.

The world slid out of focus as she touched the fire, and pictured every time she had ever lit incense. How it resisted the flame for a brief moment before catching alit, the way the end looked as the flame grew, the smoldering embers wafting scented smoke…

A flash, and the world refocused.

A small flame burned the end of the stick.

She smiled to herself, even though she felt like she had after the battle with Kum-ji: sore all over. “I’ll need to practice this, as a last resort…I hope.” Carefully sliding the stick into the holder, she focused on her dagger, unsheathed with mirrored steel reflecting moonlight.

“Father…I’ve been focused so much on surviving and helping Kouka that I can go through the days without being consumed by grief or anger. Until I’m reminded of how the kingdom at large saw you. How your kindness was a weakness, how you did nothing but try to appease everyone, either by giving land to other countries or letting the Tribes do as they wished. They don’t know how you tried to cook for me when I was sick, how you’d patiently read the birth myth to me as many times as I wanted as a child, no matter your other more pressing duties. How you sheltered me after Mother’s murder. I played along, being the daughter you wanted, the one who had no serious concerns, who selfishly demanded things from you. Would things have been different, if I hadn’t been a silly princess? If I demanded knowledge and training on ruling instead? Mundok said you were trying to make happy memories for the dark times, but would it have been better if I had looked you in the eye and demanded what was mine my birth, replacing pleasure with duty?

“I will always hold those bright happy times in my heart. But can you forgive me…for burying my grief? For not letting you see who I really was, and how I knew who I had been? I know you likely would wholeheartedly approve of not avenging you by killing Su-won, but does the fact I still love him to some degree cheapen that?”

Yona turned her focus to the smoking curling up from the incense. “It hurt, never giving any hint that you thought I would rule in my own name.” She admitted out loud, although in a voice so small as to be near silent. “That I’d just…legitimize whomever you wanted to be the next King. I wish you could have told me everything. About Uncle and Mother and the promise to Xing. And who you were planning to engage me to. I’m far past needing any sort of approval for being with Hak, but…it would be nice, to know that you’re happy for me.”

Slowly, she slid the dagger back in the sheath and tucked in back on her person. Biting her lip, she bowed to the burning incense the way she would if she was in front of her father’s tomb or memorial stone. “I miss you, and I love you. Even if the whole world curses your name…I will stand tall, and name myself as your daughter…”

Yun was practically sparkling after the close of the market two days later. “We made a small
fortune!!!” He cheered, starting to divide up the money into various hiding places, most of them on his person.

“If we’re going to keep up the entertaining routine, I’ll need an outfit.” Yona declared. “And probably teach you to dance too Yun.”

“I was able to get some really billowy fabric from that vendor you sent over by trading some of my stomach cure with him.” Yun assured her, pulling out some of the fabric in question.

In truth, the exact problem had been a bit lower than his stomach, but Yun was definitely not about to tell that.

“Oh my; this is Yamato gossamer silk!” Yona exclaimed, running a careful finger over the fabric to confirm her guess. It was crimson at one end, shading down into a purple close in color to her eyes at the other end. “How much did you get?!?”

“Huh?” Yun blinked. “Ten yards…”

“What’s so special about it?” Kija asked.

“Yamato silk is hard to get a hold of to start with.” Jaeha explained. “The sea between us and the Yamato islands is very rough, so ships can only really sail it half the year. Add in all the duty taxes to import it, and you’ve got something only rich people can afford in any significant amount. Their gossamer silk is regarded as the best.”

“Every dancer would kill for a costume of gossamer silk. Something about gossamer silk makes the dance more, and Yamato gossamer silk is the best for it.” Yona explained. “The best teahouses have at least two outfits of it; one for the madam and one for the heir for special events.”

“Holy shit and this guy just traded this much for some medicine?!?!” Yun exclaimed, carefully tucking the fabric back away. “Now I’m scared to try making anything…”

“You’ll do great Yun.” Yona assured him with a smile, making him blush.

“Guess this’ll go with it.” Hak remarked, handing her a small, thin bundle in red silk.

“Eh?” Unwrapping it, she only had to catch sight of the item inside to start tearing up.

It was the crimson and purple tessen she had been eyeing. “That’s why you had me shot at the arrow betting; you’d get more money betting on me than if you had shot.”

Grabbing the front of his robes, she kissed him deeply.

For once, the arousal and lust he felt from the torch didn’t bother Jaeha that much. With all the revelations, and Hiryuu-ou flat out telling him that the dragon’s blood wouldn’t make him fall in love with Yona or want sex with her, it had become easier to tell what was him and what the dragon’s blood for some reason. He’d still leap at the chance to sleep with Yona and Hak if it appeared.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t peeved about only having himself for company. “Can we see this miracle item that’s making Yona-chan and Hak forget they have an audience?”

Hak just showed him his middle finger before ending the kiss.

Yona flipped open the fan with a practiced hand. “It’s a tessen. My dance master at the castle showed me some techniques for fighting with a normal fan. Not that I was expected to ever need to
fight with a fan, but it’s a general part of the training.”

“Wait, wouldn’t having a costume made from really expensive cloth be suspicious?” Kija asked.

“Not as much as you’d think. Sometimes, in place of hard money, performers are paid with valuable silks, either as lengths of cloth or up to a whole garment. But we’d likely be safer getting some other cloth for a performance costume.” Yona conceded.

“So how much of a small fortune are we talking?” Yona asked Yun, tucking her new fan away.

“Thanks to you and the wedding story, we made seventy thousand rin.”

“Which would have been double if you’d charged the real value of your medicine.” She pointed out, making him turn red. “I guess the largest part should be for clothes and sewing supplies, then emergency?”

“As long as you and Zeno can pull off bargains, it’ll last longer. So twenty five thousand rin emergency, twenty thousand rin clothes. Weapons?”

“I’m still good on throwing knives, since Shin-ah has been finding the ones I used. With the arrows we filched from the battlefield and with the horses, Yona-chan should be good on arrows.” Jaeha answered.

“I got twenty thousand rin total for the two horses I was able to sell, so I should be able to get at least that much for the other two.” Hak added. “I’ll try selling them at the next town.”

“Is there anything anyone absolutely has to buy right now?” Yun asked the group firmly.

He had been able to get a couple pairs of the Kai sleeves Jaeha favored, and soft deerskin like what Shin-ah’s robe was made of. Kija had purchased a small amulet of good health to send back to Baa-Baa, while Zeno didn’t appear to have bought anything not edible with his share.

Kaya fingered her new scarf with a blush. It was a warm yellow that matched Zeno’s hair, with blue flowers the color of his eyes embroidered on it. It was softer than anything she’d ever worn before, and couldn’t wait until nightfall, when she could properly ‘thank’ him. “It’s nice to have something different after two thousand years of the same thing.” She commented to the newly returned Shuten. “I wore pretty much the same thing my whole life.”

Shuten rolled his eyes at the sappiness, despite his own habit of surprising Gi-mei with new clothes back then.

“I got more inkstones and paper, and aside from maybe some other cloth for a dance costume, we should be good until we reach Water.” Yona told him. “I need to write a letter to Tae-Jun, so we’ll head to Water after Jaeha and Zeno deliver it, unless there’s any other stops to make.”

Chapter End Notes

The poorly typed troller/complainer did have a point about Yona not grieving her father, thus that bit.
“Ginger Broth Guy!”

Tae-Jun jumped as the strange blond boy who travelled with Yona-hime-sama stuck his head out through a hole in the ceiling of his chambers. “What are you doing here? And has that hole always been there?” He asked, walking over to stand under the boy.

Reaching an arm down, the boy (Tae-Jun thought he was named Zeno) waved a folded letter at him. “Message from the Miss.”

The green-haired man who also travelled with Yona-hime-sama was smirking as he took the letter, perhaps with a little too much eagerness. “She doesn’t need a response, but she did want you to receive that before we went on to Water.” The man remarked.

“What’s happening in Water?” Tae-Jun asked.

The faces of the pair in the ceiling darkened. “Drugs.” The man said darkly. “The corrupt lord of the port of Awa in Earth had been engaged in human trafficking, trading people for drugs.”

“So she wants to help there too? But how?”

“No clue! But if at least one drug lord doesn’t end up dead Zeno will be surprised.” The boy said. “Don’t forget about everyone outside Saika!”

Zeno pulled his head up, only to stick it back out. “By the way, that ginger broth you dumped out? The Miss made it.”

Tae-Jun choked on nothing as the hole in the ceiling closed. I so carelessly tossed away the fruit of her labors?!

Smacking his cheeks, he turned to the letter, the outside unmarked beyond his name. “I wonder what is so important, for her to risk sending a letter…”

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I do not know if word of your father’s exact manner of death has reached you yet, but he was killed in the battle between Fire and Sen troops versus Sky and Earth troops.

And I was the one who killed him.

(A dumbfounded Tae-Jun had to reread that sentence to be sure he was reading it right)

He was colluding with Li Hazara of the Sen Province to overthrow Su-won, and take Hiryuu Castle and the throne for himself. This, in addition to aiding a kingslayer when he aided Su-won in his coup, was enough to warrant his death, even without the last crime.

He tried to call himself by the name of Hiryuu-ou.

I suppose you are wondering why I would view trying to claim the name of Hiryuu-ou as a crime. At some point, the rumors of Hiryuu-ou returning to strike Kan Su-jin down will reach you.
They are true, after a fashion.

I am the reincarnation of Hiryuu-ou.

Tae-Jun stared at that sentence, but the characters did not change.

Memory of who I had once been is something I have remembered all my life. While it is not my name now, I could not let it be defiled by someone with views such as his. It goes against everything I have believed in, in both of my lives, and what I fought to create with the founding of Kouka. Yun told me that the Fire Tribe General is traditionally compared to Hiryuu-ou, but...

I know this likely means little, in the wake of your father’s death. If the task I charged you with is no longer one you can tolerate, then I release you from it, if you wish. I do hope, however, that even if you no longer regard yourself as bound by that task, you will still continue to help in the restoration of Fire.

The letter was signed simply with her name. No seals.

Tae-Jun tossed Yona’s letter into the fire, blankly watching it turn to ash.

The father he had admired and respected was dead—killed by a very much alive Yona-hime-sama. Who happened to be the reincarnation of Hiryuu-ou.

The inferno she had been in the cliffs made sense now. It was a miracle he had not been consumed by it, the way his father had undoubtedly been.

I cannot resent her for taking his life. Not after he allied with a foreign power to seize the throne and tried to call himself Hiryuu-ou in front of her. The battle had turned against him by all accounts, so his death was practically guaranteed, if not by her, then by execution. He decided.

Tae-Jun shivered at the memories of how he had tried courting her in the past, and the heavy-handed intent with which he acted in the cliffs. Even with my appalling behavior, she was still willing to let me live? And charge me with such an important task?

He looked out at the night sky, the horizon tinged with the last touches of dusk. “I will do everything in my power to be worthy of the trust and faith she has placed in me.”

“Wasn’t it a little mean to tell him Yona-chan made the broth?” Jaeha asked Zeno as they left Saika.

Zeno hummed in half-agreement. “I’ve watched far too many children starve to let go of how carelessly he dumped it.”

Zeno didn’t know which ones were luckier; those who died from not enough food, or those who managed to survive.

Jaeha frowned at the dark cloud hanging over Zeno. How bad has his life been? And if it’s as bad as I suspect, how can he keep smiling?

Baa-Baa looked up from where she was (stubbornly) writing a letter to Kija, thanking him for the amulet and catching him and Yona-hime-sama up on how Seiryuu Village was doing. It turns out
that keen sight is not limited merely to the Seiryuu, as the whole clan had keen eyes, and never suffer from cataracts. Several had joined her clan’s border patrol, and others had pointed out several cracks in buildings that could grow and become dangerous.

Headman Abi was entertaining his new granddaughter, born just a few days ago. It was risky, her mother travelling at seven months, but thankfully, the risk proved worth it.

“Has a name been decided upon for the babe?” She asked.

“With recent events, I believe they have decided on ‘Yona’.” He replied.

“There was a battle recently, where the former Fire General allied himself with Li Hazara of Sen Province and tried to seize the castle. Everyone came through alive, although Hakuryuu-sama and Seiryuu-Shin-ah-sama were the ones most injured.” She informed him. “They are going to Water next; there have been severe problems with drugs.”

“Water is the Tribe founded by the first Seiryuu, correct?” He asked in confirmation.

She nodded. “Is there anything you want to inform Seiryuu-Shin-ah-sama about?” Kija had written her about how the current Seiryuu had no name until Yona-hime-sama named him, so she made sure to use his name with his title when she referred to him.

“…please convey my pleasure at how he came through the battle safely, with no permanent injury.” He finally said.

Later that night, he could not sleep, and ending up conversing with his daughter-in-law as she fed his new granddaughter. “She’s strong.” He remarked.

“That she is.” She glanced at him. “Father-in-law…who is Seiryuu-sama kin to?”

Maybe it was the hour of night, maybe it was something about the headman’s demeanor, which made her feel like she would receive some kind of answer.

“…We are not worthy to lay claim to any close tie of kinship. He is kin to all of us.” He said quietly.

“…Will you tell Seiryuu-sama?” She asked. “Who among us is his direct kin?”

In response, he rose and retired to bed.

She turned her attention to her daughter. “Even if he never knows, if he returns to the clan, I will make sure you know your uncle.” She promised her in the quiet of the night.

He had not stated such outright, but her heart told her the form of address is correct.

“It’s strange; you’d think things would have changed, with what we know now, but everything’s the same.” Kija remarked as he settled in between Zeno and Jaeha for the night.

“It’s not like they suddenly became different people.” Yun pointed out. “I mean, you already figured Yona was Hiryuu-ou reborn, so learning that she’s been aware it this whole time isn’t that big of a deal.”

“I suppose…” Kija conceded. “Oh! Shin-ah, I received a letter from Baa-Baa while you were hunting with Hak. Headman Abi was happy to hear you survived the battle with no permanent injury.”
“WHAT?!” Shin-ah shot up, speaking what passed for a yell for him. “…why?”

“Is…that not a good thing?” Jaeha asked tentatively.

“…they cared for me, with clothes and food, but my death would only mean anxious waiting, for the next cursed child to be born. Why…” Shin-ah laid back down, curling into a ball.

Ao nuzzled her blue moon dragon’s face, her fur becoming wet.

With awkwardness a blanket over them, they all slipped into silence, then into sleep.

It was some time after midnight that Shin-ah awoke. Restless, he slipped out of the tent. Scaling a nearby tree, he shoved his mask up and looked towards he thought Hakuryuu Village was.

The white dragons painted everywhere let him know he’d found it. There seemed to be recent building work, and these new buildings had blue dragons painted on them. Men of his village were on watch with Kija’s fellow villagers, and they seemed…calm? There was no hostility apparent between them.

“The headman decided that the village’s troubles were karmic retribution over how they have treated the Seiryuu. It’s slowly, but surely, making a difference. Although only those most open to it have been on patrol.”

Shin-ah jumped as his ancestor spoke from beneath him. There was a spark of anger in his chest and in his mind, in that dark corner where the cursed Seiryuu dwelled. “That’s supposed to make it better?” A voice not fully his own growled.

“It’s a start.” Yona said as she approached, dressed only in her tunic dress.

There was a stab of fear as the curse reached out to Yona, a dark dragon full of hate and grief. Sad eyes and a warm touch greeted it, taking some of the hate and grief away as she ran a hand down its back. “All I can do is apologize, for taking so long to come back. I knew a little, of how the Seiryuu were being treated, but I had no idea how deep this went. But that sounds like an excuse, doesn’t it?” She said with a sad half-smile as she kept rubbing the curse’s back, a sense of Hiryuu-ou acting with her.

Somehow Shin-ah made it back to ground level without falling out of the tree to do it. His vision was hazy, tinged with black on the edges, much like when he was killing the bandits trying to kidnap Yona.

The only clear thing was a dragon formed of fire, patiently curling around the curse, unflinching as the curse flailed in its embrace. “But I’m here now, and the clan is learning the error of its ways and starting to correct them. Too much has past between all of you to help much this generation, but things will be better for the next Seiryuu, and the one after that, all the way into the future. A gift such as this…cannot be undone, I’m afraid.”

The curse settled, exhausted from its efforts to fight. Shin-ah latched onto Yona’s waist, covering her lap, and felt his eyes drift closed, her torch warming everything inside of him.

Even the curse.

(Hak looked to the other tent, where the others had their heads out. Putting a finger to his lips, he glared, before retreating back inside. This was something both of them needed. Maybe it wouldn’t get rid of the curse completely, but it would help.)
Morning found Yona leaning on the tree, her hand tangled in Shin-ah’s hair, having drifted off in the act of stroking it.)

Aro sat down next to the bonfire in Katan Village, still not quite believing she was here. A whole host of surprises had happened over this past month.

First, a travelling entertainment troupe, full of hot guys and a pretty, mysterious dancer.

Then a group of soldiers different from the ones usually seen, travelling with some kind of lord.

That group had returned a few days later, with a host of shocks.

First, Senri was now a part of Kouka, not Sen Province. Second, that lord was actually the King of Kouka!

King Su-won must really want to help the famine here; if he’s willing to pay the amount that Grandfather always gives people as a joke for Iza seeds and knowledge on cultivation… Aro had come with her grandfather and several others, to oversee the initial cultivation of Iza in the region, and teach the locals. The price for doing that was enough to feed her whole village for a year, and feed them well.

Katan was the ‘hub’ of the region, and already had Iza planted, to their surprise. Everything had been so busy, these first couple days, that this was the first time any of them were able to just sit and not doze off. “Where did you get Iza from?” she asked the headman, Se-dol.

“Yona and Yun sent it to us.” He replied.

“Yun…a lad that looks like a girl?” Grandfather asked.

Se-dol nodded. “No wonder he was so interested in it.” He remarked.

“Yona danced at our Fire Quelling Festival. She was amazing!” Aro gushed. “Her dance blew everyone away!”

“Are they from this village?” Her cousin, Iro, asked.

Se-dol shook his head. “Yun used to trade with us. After things got bad enough that we had nothing left to trade, he’d bring food. The rest of them followed him, after he left without telling them where he was going. Officials came while they were here, planning to take the supplies Yun had brought in lieu of tax money…and my daughter, when she tried to stop them. They beat up the officials, and decided to play at being bandits to protect villages from officials seeking taxes. I thought something bad would happen, when Saika sent the old General’s second son to capture them, but Yona somehow got him to help people, before they went looking for a crop that could grow here.”

“…but who is she?” Aro wondered sometime later.

It was just her and a woman she thought was Se-dol’s wife, Jinshi. “They never said, and we never asked…but I think that Yona is the Crown Princess of Kouka.” She replied.

Aro just about fell off her log. She opened her mouth, but she couldn’t think of a thing to say. “The only child of the previous King, King Il, was commonly known to have brilliant red hair. The night her father was killed, she disappeared as well, along with her guard, Son Hak. Kija, the one with white hair, was always calling her ‘Hime-sama’, as did Tae-Jun-sama when he was visiting. But we didn’t ask, because then we could legitimately say we had not seen her, should anyone come looking
for the Princess.” Jinshi continued.

“If she was chased from the castle, why is she travelling as a dancer? Shouldn’t she go back?” Aro wondered.

“I can’t say for sure. But as she helped us gather food and tend to the sick, there was a sense of sorrow. From what I overheard, she had known something of the way things were here in Fire, but she was still surprised. The late King had evidently told her that everyone was happy and had enough food, and while she knew he was lying to her, I think she might be trying to make things closer to the way her father wanted them to be.” Jinshi added. “No one liked King Il, with how he always gave in to the demands of others.”

“I know; Senri had been forfeited back to Kai when I was little because of him. But he wasn’t all bad, right? Just going off of Yona…” Aro trailed off. “None of us girls in Senri stood a chance with any of the guys with her, even for a night.”

“They’re all devoted to her, even if some show it more than others.” Jinshi agreed.

The Crown Princess of Kouka dancing for a poor village…tending to sick people without fear of contracting their illness… Aro reflected as she laid in bed, her body tired and her mind awake. And practically suggested a three-way with Hak. Her face burned as her mind unhelpfully reminded her of that. “That would explain that gold hairpin. But who gave it to her, if she holds onto it yet won’t wear it?” She asked the darkness.

“What can you tell us about the drug epidemic in Water?” Yun asked as they neared Water.

“It’s worse than opium and they mix it into the wine at the teahouses under their control. Naturally, in those houses the girls are addicted too. There’s been rumors of addicts being kidnapped, but not many people believe them.” Zeno replied. “Zeno thinks it’s called Nadai.”

“It’s the drug Kum-ji had been dealing in.” Yona added.

“Makes me wish we had managed to sink more of his drug ships.” Jaeha wished darkly. “What’s it do?”

“It’s a narcotic. It starts out as pleasurable, dulling pain, but it can lead to hallucinations and extreme pain, making the person go berserk. Zeno saw one addict lose an arm and keep going. He bled out and died, since he didn’t feel that his arm was gone. Then there’s the disappearances.”

“Disappearances?” Kija asked.

“There’s reports of addicts going missing. Most people, officials included, just think that they’ve overdosed and died, with the bodies not popping up yet. Zeno’s not too sure that’s the case for everyone, but he can’t really say why. Just his gut.” Zeno explained.

“First pirates, then bandits, and now drug dealers. Isn’t there a safe problem you could investigate?” Yun complained, but his complaint lacked venom. The doctor in him was curious if there was any legitimate medical use for this drug, and how it was made, but he wasn’t THAT curious.
I HAVE A RECOMMENDATION ON TVTROPES!!!! Next goal, have a review added. So shout out to Hannoki Kaen, who made the recommendation. And cyber Ao plushies.

That bit with Shin-ah and Yona snuck its way in on me.

Had kinda expected a bigger reaction to Yona setting the incense on fire, but it’s not something that will pop up a whole lot, beyond her practicing. It’s the ace in the hole last resort.
Sue-hi, formerly Crown Princess Yona’s personal maid, sighed quietly as she went about her cleaning. The whole air of the castle had changed. True, Su-won-sama was nice and polite, and there hadn’t been any major upheavals in the staff, but…

…the castle seemed dimmer without the princess. Even the guards most hostile to the late King and the Princess found themselves missing her greetings and inquiries about their families, based on what she had overheard. Poor Min-su was a completely different person, once his injury from a stray arrow healed and he returned to duty.

Her lips quirked up as she remembered when she was assigned to Yona-hime-sama. It had been shortly after the chaos generated by the princess, Su-won-sama, and General Hak when her bleeding first came. Now a woman, it had been decided she was to have a personal maid, and Sue-hi had been chosen due to only being a few years older than the princess.

She would be lying if she said she hadn’t been a little leery of the assignment; going from a minor maid to the Princess’s personal maid was dizzying, and she wasn’t so confident as to be sure of success. Listening to the other personal maids complain of how busy their ladies kept them and were rarely satisfied filled her with dread.

Yona-hime-sama had been nothing like she expected. It was a rare thing for her to not be up and dressed for the day by the time Sue-hi came to her rooms. “I’m so used to dressing myself, and since I don’t care much for gaudy outfits…” Yona-hime-sama had confessed, almost sheepishly, after fourteen straight days of this. “My hair doesn’t like cooperating either.”

She had been right about that. The longest any style held was a few hours, and that was when they went with just pulling her hair partly back. “It might be better for you to do other duties unless I need you, like for formal occasions. I know that likely wasn’t what you were expecting…” Yona-hime-sama finally decided after two months.

So in the end, she had had all the prestige of being the Princess’s personal maid, with only a quarter of the workload. Her work wound up mostly being to keep Yona-hime-sama company. Her mother worked in the sewing offices, so often she would bring sewing and do that while Yona-hime-sama wrote or read. “Father went overboard, keeping sharp things away from me after Mother was killed.” She had remarked once, eyeing her work. “I don’t know if I could push that or not.”

One day, as she entered, she would have sworn there was a man standing behind Yona-hime-sama as she wrote at her desk, disappearing when she blinked. Yona-hime-sama noticed her puzzlement. “You can see them? My guardian spirits.” She clarified as Sue-hi frowned. “Aside from Hak, no one else has been able to, but others have felt them.”

All in all, Yona-hime-sama proved a kind, yet very unusual, mistress. It felt strange, not having her kind warmth nearby, or hearing the maids gush over the latest thing she had done for one of their number, or watching her moon over both Su-won-sama and General Hak.

Sighing louder this time, she finished her current shelf, then lined the stuffed dragons back up on it, the crimson one in the middle.
Re-entering the main room, she squeaked and bowed as she realized there was someone else present. “Su-won-sama!”

“Oh…Sue-hi, right?” She nodded. “You’re not in trouble. To be honest, I hadn’t considered the necessity of dusting.” He admitted sheepishly.

“…it feels strange, to not dust once a week.” She admitted herself, raising.

“I’ll be going to Water shortly, so I had hoped she might have something on what’s going on there.” He gestured to the scroll and book he held. “I’ll leave you to your work, then.”

“What would be happening Water?” She wondered out loud after he departed. “I thought they were the most peaceful Tribe…Not to mention, why would Yona-hime-sama have information about whatever’s happening there?”

“Now, I’d like to change, so please step out for a few minutes.” Yona declared, temporarily evicting the dragons, Hak grabbing Jaeha’s ponytail to ensure compliance.

“Shouldn’t you be in there ‘helping’?” Jaeha asked.

“There’s nothing that says we have to do something every time we have a chance to be alone.” Hak replied flatly. “Besides, it’d be rude to hog the room for that.”

“Can I steal you away to a teahouse with me tonight?” Jaeha asked, hooking an arm around Hak’s neck.

“Hell no. Take one of the others.”

“No way; they’re too weird looking!!!” Jaeha complained, gesturing to the others. You couldn’t find a group of more obvious virgins!

“No. Way.”

“Problem?” Yona asked with a blink, now dressed in a dry robe as she stuck her head out.

“Droopy Eyes is trying to drag me into another teahouse.” Hak complained, escaping Jaeha’s hold.

“I’d rather you not go alone, given how they’re a major vector in the drug trade…Zeno?”

Zeno turned to her. “Could you go with Jaeha? I don’t want to chance anyone being alone.”

“Alright Miss!”

“Have fun.” She said as she bid them farewell with a wave and a smile.

“I don’t know what’s worse; Yona-chan telling me to have fun or having to take a chaperone.” Jaeha grumbled.

“The Miss isn’t innocent. From what she’s said to Zeno, she remembers what it can be like, even if Hiryuu-ou had only been with his queen. As for the chaperone…” Zeno trailed off. “Nadai can affect even me.”

“What?!” Jaeha exclaimed. Just how potent is this drug, to affect mister I-can’t-get-drunk-or-be-poisoned?
“Normally, Zeno isn’t affected by drugs or poisons, barring an extremely high dose. But this is something else; something potent enough. Of course, it was mixed with wine when Zeno encountered it, which probably made it worse. Zeno knows how to fake it, so he can look out for Ryokuryuu.”

“When did you wind up ingesting it?” Jaeha asked.

“Zeno had visited a house affiliated with Mistress Sayuri’s to see what they knew about Nadai, but it turned out to be one of the houses ‘taken over’ by the drug dealers.” Zeno’s eyes were distant.

“That…had been a long night…”

Only Kaya knew all the details, having dove into his mind to do what she could to help while his brothers did what they could on the outside.

Drowning in a cesspit was not, unfortunately, a novel experience, but it had been one he had never wanted to repeat.

Yona had been frantic when he returned, looking and feeling like death warmed over, even in the heart of the dragons’ blessing. Once he was cleaned up and feeling more like a person than a corpse, she had taken him straight to Mistress Sayuri’s, informing her of what had happened.

While her face had been calm during the debriefing, save for a flaring of nostrils, when he had gone back, he found the whole house had been razed to the ground. Apparently Mistress Sayuri had called due all the debts that particular house owed her, and when they failed to pay, she had agents sell everything of value on the property (including the girls). After that, the building had ‘mysteriously’ burned down, the rumor being the drug dealers did it out of revenge for losing that business.

When Yona learned of what had happened, she had been grimly satisfied, making Zeno wonder if burning the building had been her idea.

“There’s darkness here…and not just from dusk falling.” Jaeha noted with a sidelong glance at Zeno.

Before Zeno could reply, a pair of teahouse girls called to them.

“This is very sweet-smelling incense.” Zeno commented as Jaeha finished his current song.

“It’s very popular here in Shisen; it works wonders against fatigue.” The brunette lady answered.

“Did the two of you travel far?”

“Depends on how you define ‘far’.”

Okay, I am totally taking Zeno with me every time. Jaeha did his best to conceal his amazement as Zeno conversed like a pro. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something in Zeno’s manner gave the impression of ‘experienced older man’, in place of the ‘innocent kid’ he usually was. Maybe Ouryuu’s power grants youth too, and he’s a little older than he’s willing to claim?

Setting that thought aside, he tended to the nails of the lighter-haired girl, which were cracked and discolored. “Her nails are completely frightful, aren’t they?” The brunette said, a little cruelly, making her partner shrink in on herself.

“No. I just thought to trying touching her hands. They’re very beautiful.” Jaeha said sincerely, smiling broadly as the girl stared at her hand, before turning red all the way down her neck.

A noise that sounded like a scream drew the dragons’ attention outside the room. “Was that someone
screaming just now?” Zeno asked.

“I suppose. It must be a guest in a different room, likely stirring up a drunken ruckus.” She laid a hand on Jaeha’s arm as he stood to investigate. “You needn’t concern yourself; it’s quite a normal occurrence.”

Her nails weren’t discolored, but they were painted so heavily that it made Jaeha a little suspicious. I’m pretty sure we’re being watched… A small nod from Zeno said that he had felt the eyes too.

“Now… would you like to try our house liquor? It’s made with the finest ingredients that Water produces.” The younger girl was trembling as she moved to pour.

Zeno declined a cup with a rueful smile. “I must stay sober, I’m afraid. Our master wants an early start in the morning, and one of us needs to keep an eye on the time. Especially since he has the tendency to lose his clothes when he drinks.”

Jaeha ignored what Zeno was implying as he accepted the cup. They feel it too. In the darkness of the drug epidemic in Water, this place is especially dark.

Suddenly the girl snatched the cup away with a cry. “A-rin!” The brunette scolded, as she raised the cup to her lips.

Jaeha gently plucked the cup from the girl, A-rin, and downed it in one go. There’s a bitterness in this…it’s faint, so I doubt most people would notice it on the first sip. Then later, they’d be too drunk to notice. Or to care. “Thank you for the evening. The liquor of the Water Tribe is indeed exceptional.” Jaeha tossed a bag of rin into A-rin’s lap. “C’mon mister time watcher, let’s get back before you have to try and carry me back.”

“Alright.” Giving A-rin and the brunette a kiss on the back of the hand, Zeno followed Jaeha out.

Jaeha sagged on the wall, fingers clenching his tunic. “How potent is this narcotic if it’s hitting me already?” He panted, feeling flushed in a way that had nothing to do with arousal or alcohol.

“They burn it in the incense too. The sweetness was to hide the bitterness.” Zeno revealed. “Not enough to compete with A-rin’s withdrawal symptoms. Her companion is likely higher ranked, enough so where she could get a hit beforehand, while she has to work for her hits.” She probably sold herself to support the habit to start with.

Zeno and the ghosts watched as Jaeha tried leaping away, but he only managed to trip, falling flat on his face. “If it wasn’t so dire I’d laugh.” Abi admitted as Zeno managed to haul Jaeha up to splay on his back, Shuten helping to take some of the weight. “We all would.” Guen agreed.

Knowing the others would feel the strangeness of Jaeha’s presence, Zeno still sent a pulse of alarm. “Shuten, can you possess him?” He asked. “Even if only to help him stay on his feet?”

Shuten tried, only to be repulsed. “No go. Yona’s not in danger, so his own strength is enough to keep me out.” He reported with a shake of his head and a grimace.

Jaeha figured the hallucinations Zeno had mentioned before had started, if Zeno was talking to his ancestor. Zeno himself looked like some kind of humanoid dragon, as a hand of fire touched his forehead. Blinking, Yona’s face floated before him, then his vision filled with the blue of Hak’s coat.

He would never, ever, breathe a word of it out loud, but even with the hallucinations and the rising pain, he felt safe and grounded.
Hak pushed everyone out into the hall. “It’s too dangerous, so stay out here until I say so.” He ordered over Jaeha’s screams as he slid the door shut. *I hate to admit it, but he’s like me; I sure as hell wouldn’t want to be seen like this.*

Yona pressed her hands to her heart. One of her dragons was hurting. Going off the faces of the others, they could feel it too, even if Yun was reacting as much to the general mood as to Jaeha’s presence. *Wait…*

“I have an idea. Close your eyes and focus on Jaeha.” She ordered, and everyone did, even Yun.

Yona closed her own eyes and turned inwards, towards the cat that was Jaeha. Its back was arched and it was hissing, afraid. The wolf edged close, inch by inch, belly flat on the ground and ears back, as submissive as it could be. The sun and moon didn’t try getting close, but pulsed comfort and safety and home. A dragon of dark fire stubbornly clung to the cat, striving to keep it from hurting itself.

Then the nesting mother appeared, hovering close by, wanting to help yet not knowing how. She floated over to the nesting mother, who started. “I’m not imagining this, am I?” Yun’s voice asked.

“No. Being exposed to all of our auras means you’ve started to gain power of your own.” Something shifted, and she was herself, not the torch, sitting with him-her on dragon-them. “It seems you’re gaining a dragon self much like Hak.” Him-her continued.

“But how can we help?” Yun pleaded.

“Remind Jaeha that he’s safe and grounded and home. For no matter how much of a free spirit Ryokuryuu is, he still needs a pole star to guide his way.” The Green Dragon God said as he appeared, making everyone but the Crimson Dragon God Trio jump. “After that, all we can do is wait for dawn.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Jaeha scowled at his ancestor. “Thanks for stating the obvious.”

“Though I can’t call you a huge idiot, since I’d have done the same thing in your place.” His annoying ghost stalker admitted, looking out to sea pensively.

“Where is this anyway?” Jaeha asked, looking around.

It reminded him of the cliffs around Awa, but he knew it wasn’t Awa.

“The sight of the First Ryokuryuu Village, founded by virtue of the fact that this is where I died. True, I wandered all over Kouka, but this had been one of my favorite places.” He replied.

“Is there a reason for this?”

“Well excuse me for trying to help you escape the pain.” His ancestor said flatly, as the scene changed to the cliffs of Awa.

Jaeha rolled his eyes, but said nothing. “…thank you.”

He felt rather than saw his ancestor’s shock, making him smirk.
Jaeha slowly floated awake, feeling the weight of several people on top of him. It didn’t feel restricting, but comforting.

Opening his eyes, he saw Yona’s crimson hair, and realized his left arm was around her shoulders, making her cling to him. Looking right, Yun’s head was pillowed on his chest, the rest of him curled into a ball at his side. Kija was splayed across his legs, and Shin-ah was more curled against Yona then himself.

“I wonder if I should have drank it in your place.”

Craning his head, Jaeha saw Zeno sitting against the wall at his head. “If your experience was anything like mine, then it wouldn’t be worth it for you to go through that hell again. It’s not like I was forced to drink it.”

Zeno snorted. “A girl practically screaming for help with her body offering? With how you are, you might as well has been forced.” With his face serious, Zeno seemed older than his (self) stated age of seventeen, much like he had been at the teahouse with the girls. “At least Yona won’t have the building burnt down this time; too much chance for it to spread to the neighbors.”

“What do you mean?”

“Zeno’s pretty sure the Miss arranged for the house where Zeno had drank the Nadai to be burnt down, after Mistress Sayuri sold off everything of value inside.”

“That I can believe.” Hak commented as he entered the room. “So Droopy Eyes drank tainted liquor because of a girl in trouble? Not surprised.”

Hak poked Jaeha in the face with the end of his weapon. “But no matter the reason, you still can’t go drinking bad stuff all the time.”

“Sorry.” Yona stirred, then shot up awake. “JAEHA!”

Her shout woke the others. Jaeha felt weirdly light as their weight came off, then Yona hugged on his neck, so it wasn’t that bad. “How are you feeling?” She asked as she pulled back.

“I’m fine.” Jaeha began sitting up, doing his best to mask how weak he felt.

It didn’t work. “Sleep you idiot.” Hak ordered, shoving him flat on his back.

“Yeah sleep!” Kija agreed.

“You had a rougher night than the rest of us, so go back to sleep!” Yona seconded, despite the faint bags under her eyes.

“We tried making you throw whatever it was up, but that didn’t work. Even after Raiju and Kija punched you in the stomach.” Yun said, checking his heart rate.

“No wonder it felt like my bones were breaking into tiny pieces. I wouldn’t have died from the drug, but from being beaten to death.” Jaeha complained. “…All of you still felt close.” He admitted.

“Yona suggested we focus on you, and then it was like we were someplace else.” Yun explained. “It was really weird, we weren’t ourselves, but different things. It’s kind of hazy.”

“Whatever it was worked; he calmed down after you started.” Hak commented.

“Still, a drug this strong, there’s bound to be some aftereffects today.”
“You’re too reckless.” Yona said with a frown.

“Reckless Ryokuryuu!” Zeno sing-songed.

“It’d be for the best if we keep you inside.” Kija declared.

“Time for some discipline so you don’t do something that stupid again.” Hak decided, more than a little gleeful.

“Let’s tie him up.”

“No need; I got anesthesia, so we can knock him out and make him go back to sleep.” Yun countered, already reaching for it.

Jaeha began panicking. “Hey, let’s not do something—“

He fell back, unconscious. Yona blinked innocently, moving her hands from the pressure point she had pressed. “…Hime-san, you scare me at times…” Hak admitted as he pulled out rope.

“We’re going back to where we met up with Zeno and Jaeha. When he wakes up keep him here.” Yona told Shin-ah.

“…how far…?”

“As long as his body’s in one piece.” Hak said, double checking his knots. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll stay out the whole time we’re gone.”

Chapter End Notes

Real reason Yun’s a dragon? I got tired of always typing ‘the dragons and Yun’, since I count Hak as a dragon.

Figured I’d pop back to the castle and show how an outsider is handling the changes.

Vaguely sulky over the poverty of comments last chapter, but it’s also nearly time for my period.
Su-won grimaced as he read Yona’s informant’s report. “I can’t say what’s worse, the drug’s side
effects, or the withdrawal symptoms.” He mused, pushing the scroll away.

The first part of her notes was a rant over General An Jun-gi’s inaction.

’It doesn’t matter if he didn’t want to move against Southern Kai, he could have, and should have,
done more. He’s perfectly within his rights to arrest and charge distributors and dealers, and he
could have asked for royal aid in setting up clinics and shelters for recovering addicts. Barring that,
he still should have brought this to the attention of Father and the other generals. It’s the drug the
corrupt lord of Awa is importing. It’s only a matter of time before Nadai spreads to the other Tribes.
In time, Kai, North or South, could take advantage of Our dependence on something only they can
provide.

The well is tainted, and only raging and boiling water can cleanse it. Not a stagnant pool.’
After that was a list of pros and cons for military action against Southern Kai. “If I’m following her
logic, action against the Southern Kai lords who are supplying Nadai—and who have been the
customers in Kum-ji’s human trafficking—is the best action, even if it doesn’t lead to regaining the
land taken from Earth during the last reign…” He considered out loud.

Turning the page, he started when he read the heading.

Grounds for War?

“Huh?” Confused, he read on.

Would the actions of one or two lords be grounds for war with Southern Kai in it’s entirely, not just
the lords responsible?

Given the nastiness of the side effects and withdrawal symptoms, it’s as dangerous, if not more so,
than any disease.

Undermines Our economy and defense.

Likely to promote internal divisions.

What is the likelihood of being able to gain the secret of Nadai’s manufacture and ingredients?

I need to learn just what’s in Nadai, and how it’s made. Based on what I currently know, I can’t
decide if Nadai is worth a war with Kai. But if it’s spread to another Tribe…

“By itself, Nadai would not be enough to justify war. But it is a thorny question.” Su-won rubbed his
eyes.
I should go to bed; there’s still a lot to do before I leave for Water. But…
He flipped open Yona’s book of memories to where he’d left off.

“That went better than I had thought. Though I wish Yellow Brother had given Zeno more
information about his power. Or picked someone else; I hate the idea of him being my human
shield.” Hiryuu reflected to himself, after the first major battle since the creation of the Four Dragon Warriors.

In the month since his brothers’ actions killed Yuhon and all his immediate subordinates, nearly everyone had been running around taking care of things. Consolidating his power, making sure the families of the men Yuhon murdered would be looked after for all their days, Shuten getting smacked around by his ‘lady-friend’ (as Guen called her) for leaping off without her...

One of the most divisive decisions had been the one to divvy up the new kingdom (now that it was large enough to be called that) into Tribes, headed by the dragons and himself. As the northeast was most of what had been his originally, that became the Fire Tribe. Guen got the northwest, mainly because his family had ties there, and he had decided the best revenge he could have with Yuhon dead was to make the new Earth Tribe great. Abi got the southwest, since his family estates were in the region, and he more than a little gleeful at pointing out to his father and brother that as the head of the Water Tribe, he no longer had to listen to them. Shuten got southeast, since the old province of Silla had been where the fighting pits were. He also called dibs on being the Wind Tribe, since the element appealed to his sense of freedom. Zeno got the area immediately surrounding Kuuto and the castle, and the element of Sky.

He found his dragon warriors on the verge of a fight. “I see all of you are getting along.” He said as he drew closer.

Guen bowed as Zeno asked, “That looks like getting along to you?”

“Of course; it reminds me of cute little dragon nestlings playing.” He elaborated with a smile.

“Ou-sama, you need your eyes checked.” Abi remarked flatly, unimpressed.

“You must be going senile if that’s what you’re seeing.” Shuten chimed in.

“Anyway, I’ve figured out more about my power!” Zeno cut in.

Before anyone could stop him, he slammed his fist on the low stone wall, with enough force for the bones in his hand to break. Blood dripped onto the ground as he clutched his hand. “Oi, what the hell do you think—” Guen’s mouth snapped shut as he grabbed Zeno’s hand, and everyone saw that his hand was in perfect condition, like he’d never broken it on the stone wall.

He felt his heart in his throat as everything stopped. Yellow Brother had given Zeno THAT power?!! No wonder Zeno had felt like him when they first met; Yellow must have planned this years ago. The night after everyone received their power, he had dreamed of his brothers. White, Blue, and Green were each missing the part they had given their warrior, but Yellow had been nowhere in sight.

As angry as he was with his eldest brother, grief for Zeno consumed him. “—right, Ou-sama?” Zeno’s voice cut through his daze.

Not really conscious of moving, he wrapped Zeno in a hug. “Ou-sama...?” Zeno said, confused as he returned the hug.

How can I tell him what his power is? How can I express in words the pain and sorrow his future holds? Pulling back, he removed his pendant and put it on Zeno. “My brothers gave that to me when I descended. So let it remind you that I’m always with you.” He told Zeno, feeling the pendant cling to its creator, conveying his wish.

“Your Majesty, there are reports of Yuhon’s rebels making trouble north of Chi’shin.” A soldier said with a bow as he approached.
“Ready the troops to move out.” He ordered.

“Another battle so soon? When will they learn?” Guen complained.

“Zeno, stay here.” He ordered, leaving his dragons shocked as he left to prepare himself for departure.

I can’t live with myself if I’m wrong, and Zeno’s power isn’t what I think it is. I can’t assume he could survive anything, only to watch him fall, taking a killing blow meant for me. I will not allow anyone to die for me ever again.

“What does Hiryuu-ou mean?” Su-won wondered. “Why would Ouryuu being able to heal from any injury make him react like that? I get why he doesn’t want Ouryuu on the battlefield, since he’s the youngest and not a trained fighter, but why…”?

Blowing out the lamp, he retired for the night.

“In some ways, this is worse than Awa. There people at least tried to be cheerful. Here? They’re too tired to bother.” Yona remarked as they walked, observing the people. “It’s become normalized, so people don’t care anymore. As long as it’s not them. And for the ones already enthralled, they don’t care about anything but the next high.”

“Zeno counts ten.”

“Ten what?” Kija asked.

“Addicts we’ve past.” Zeno replied. “Look at the teeth and fingernails. They discolor, and the teeth rot away. The toenails discolor the same way. The darker the color, the worse the addiction.”

“It’s just not the same, with everyone gathered.” Guen complained with a sigh. “As horrific as it’ll be, I wish Zeno’d hurry up and reveal his power.”

“I hear ya. Especially with enough predecessors placated for Kija to see us.” Shuten agreed.

“It must be the end of the world if the two of you are agreeing.” Abi noted.

“You can’t say you’re not tired of all this hiding bullshit.” Shuten grumbled. “The group’s too large now.”

“We can’t make Zeno hurry up and reveal everything. He deserves to reveal it on his own terms.” Abi reminded Shuten.

“Hey, why’s that girl spying on them?” Guen forestalled the potential fight by pointing out a girl ducking behind a pillar as Yona looked back in her direction.

She looked to be about Yona’s age, in a higher quality outfit.

“Hmmm…I’d say she was swooning over one of the guys and was too shy to approach, but she looks suspicious, not love-struck.” Abi mused, as Yona turned back in the girl’s direction again, feeling eyes on her.

“She doesn’t strike me as a working girl; too innocent.” Shuten remarked. “But that still leaves the question of why a rich girl is spying on them.”
Abi opened his mouth to say something, when he caught sight of something that made him change whatever he was planning to say into a snort of laughter.

Turning to look where Abi was looking, Guen and Shuten burst out laughing.

Jaeha was working his way to where the others were, Shin-ah latched onto his waist trying to stop him. “I’m surprised he hasn’t tried just leaping to get him off.” Guen somehow got out.

“Probably doesn’t want to hurt Shin-ah.” Shuten said as he calmed. “’course, if Shin-ah just paralyzed him—”

“‘You know Shin-ah doesn’t like that part of his power.’” Abi cut in.

“I’m guessing Jaeha’s gonna try and get Yona to stop investigating Nadai.” Guen noted. “Hasn’t he learned by now that trying to stop her will just strengthen her resolve?”

A thud as Abi’s and Shuten’s wrestling took them off the roof was his only response. “Really, you’re trained fighters; you can each do better than that.” Guen commented as he leaned over the edge of the roof to look at them.

“HYPOCRITE!!!!” Abi and Shuten yelled as they glared at him, Shuten’s hand twisted in Abi’s hair in an attempt to shove his face into the mud.

Despite feeling him approach, Yona still jumped when Jaeha’s hand landed on her shoulder. “Jaeha! And Shin-ah!”

“Worst game of tag ever.” Jaeha grumbled, still dragging Shin-ah, who was still clinging to his waist.

He hadn’t noticed Ao/Pukyuu clinging to his ponytail.

“Sorry Yona…” Shin-ah apologized.

“It’s alright Shin-ah, you did your best.” Yona assured him. “You shouldn’t be moving around so much Jaeha.”

“You should be staying put as well! And stop sticking your nose into this town’s business!” This out of character behavior for Jaeha stunned everyone.

“Listen, the darkness here is far deeper and uglier than Awa. If you get involved with this, you could be killed.” There was a sense of a plea in his voice.

Yona just quietly shook her head.

The cat was in full out attack mode as Jaeha clenched his fists and shouted, “LISTEN TO ME DAMNIT!!! IT’S NOT SAFE HERE!!!”

The sound of Jaeha yelling distracted Abi and Shuten from their wrestling, both of them now looking like mud puppies.

“Jaeha, if I had wanted anything close to a guarantee of safety, I’d have stayed in Fuuga like Hak had wanted me too, while he ran and took the blame for a crime that’s not his, not coming for any of you.” The dancing embers in her eyes fixed Jaeha’s gaze on them. “Any absolute guarantee I could have laid claim to, died with Father. I will not turn my head and pretend not to see, just because it may be dangerous. For all we know, it could already be in Awa.”

This drew gasps from the others. Despite knowing that this was the drug Kum-ji had been dealing in,
no one but Zeno had quite made the connection that Nadai could have taken root there.

“Should it spread to another Tribe, then its only a matter of time before it affects the whole kingdom, leaving Us vulnerable to Kai, North or South, being dependent on something only they can provide. Also, I cannot forgive the people who brought the poison Nadai here, not after it has hurt you.” Her eyes softened as she grabbed Jaeha’s hands. “I’m not ignoring your worries. I’ll do my best to stay safe, just how all of you will do your best to stay safe and keep everyone else safe. But please, don’t ask me to turn my head and run away from this.” Squeezing his hands, she let them drop from hers.

Jaeha shifted uncomfortably. “It’s totally unfair when you put it like that.” Reluctantly, he consented to her wish. “…I understand.”

“Now that was weird.” Hak remarked as they started a slow walk back to the inn, Yun keeping an eye out for a cheap place to eat. “I didn’t know you could raise your voice like that.”

“It was a mistake.” Jaeha admitted. “Ever since meeting her, I keep doing things that aren’t really like me. It’s a huge pain.”

“There’s no way you can be hiding any other sides after last night. I’m pretty sure I saw all of them.”

“How mean…” Jaeha complained with a sigh and hung head.

“Yep, she’s got Jaeha totally wrapped around her finger.” Guen commented as Abi and Shuten rejoined him on the roof. “It’s like the harder he fought the bond, the tighter it ended up becoming.”

“And this is news…how?” Shuten questioned as Yona whirled around to look in the direction of the girl who had been spying on them, drawing Kija’s attention.

“He has a point; I doubt there’s anything she could ask of any of them that they wouldn’t do.” Abi agreed with Shuten as he sat down next to Guen, who ‘subtly’ leaned away from him and his mud.

Catching Shuten’s eye, Abi let a wicked grin cross his face as the two of them hugged Guen from both sides, getting him as muddy as they were. “HEY!!!” Guen struggled to get his dragon arm free, so he could punch them, but all his struggling accomplished was sending them off the roof and into the mud.

Pinned in the mud under Abi and Shuten, Guen just sighed. “I hate both of you.”

“No you don’t.” They chorused.

“Right, I’ve been wanting to ask everyone, if you know. What’s the education level in the kingdom? How easy is it for the average person to learn to read, write, and do math?” Yona asked that evening. Tomorrow they would scout for a place that would let her perform, and Yun was sewing an outfit for her, although not from the Yamato gossamer silk. She worked on a spare tunic for Zeno; once his power was revealed, he would be very hard on his clothes, so she wanted to have some spares ready.

“My whole village learns all of that.” Kija answered. “But we’re likely an exception, not a rule.”

“Until I reached Awa, I’d only read the birth myth. My predecessor taught me some math when he wasn’t too drunk, and Captain Gi-gan taught me the rest.” Jaeha said.

“Hmm…Zeno can’t remember either way for his village. An old oracle taught Zeno before he died.” This wasn’t quite true. While most of his memories from his distant childhood were murky, he did
know he had learned the basics, before the plague came.

“…the headman’s and the traders’ families…?” Shin-ah said tentatively. “…what’s ‘math’?”

“Stuff with numbers, like figuring out how much you can charge for something you’ve made and still make some money.” Yun explained, frowning at his stitches.

“…they did that, then. I’d watch the lessons, but I wasn’t really taught.” Shin-ah continued.

“Zeno can teach Seiryuu!”

“Only if he wants to.” Yona cautioned.

“I’d like that, Zeno.” Shin-ah agreed with a faint smile. Even with Zeno likely having learned more things than he could even think of, he was less intimidating compared to Yun, and Jaeha would likely spend as much time trying to catch a glimpse of his eyes.

To be honest, the more times Jaeha tried to look at his eyes, the more he avoided his attempts out of fun than fear. It reminded him of the times the children would play ‘keep away’.

“Most of Fuuga can at least read and write their names and do sums. Gramps makes sure all the warriors learn the Prime Three, as he calls it. Outside? Usually the village headman and the traders and merchants can.” Hak informed Yona. “What are you planning?”

“I’m trying to figure out what it would take to set up universal schooling, open to everyone regardless of status or money.”

“Why?” Yun asked. “I’m not sure how much people would care about learning. Mother had a couple of easy books, but I mostly taught myself. At least in Fire, people are more concerned with being able to eat and if they can pay taxes.”

“Year after year, there’s hundreds of fraud and contract violation cases that reach the castle, ninety percent of which could have been avoided if the victim could read the most important items. Most of the time, they have no trouble with basic math, but get tripped up with percentages and proportions.” Yona explained. “I know I need to take care of the Nadai problem and the famine in Fire, but I think more people would be interested in learning than you think Yun. Especially if it’s free.”

“I don’t recall something like that being attempted before.” Hak noted. “I mean, there are schools, but those are mainly for scholars and government officials and their sons.”

“Except the exams, and even the schools themselves, are becoming formalities. The quality of their work is declining, since they’re almost guaranteed a position.” Yona complained. “By starting up universal education, we can hopefully attract new talent. And when I say everyone, I mean everyone, girls and mature adults as well.” Yona continued.

“Why would you have to specify that girls can attend as well?” Kija asked, confused.

“People are going to presume that girls aren’t allowed unless explicitly stated. Since the expectation is for girls to be in charge of the home, outside the noble and courtier families, many people would not see the point in teaching a girl something she doesn’t need. Courtesans learn, but that’s only so they can be a more attractive option for the upper classes.” Jaeha explained to him.

“That makes no sense!” Kija complained. “The girls of my village have the same expectations, but that’s never stopped us from teaching them!”
“You’re also a lot more isolated. With limited amounts of new blood coming in, making sure everyone is educated makes sense, and is easier to teach smallish village like yours than a whole province or kingdom.” Hak pointed out.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I realized the Akatsuki no Yona wikia gave ages for the first generation AFTER I had settled on my timeline of ages. Go figure. So, here’s my timeline of ages for everyone, as of the dragon gods’ descent and the creation of the Dragon Warriors.

Guen: 30

Shuten: Between 26 and 30 (he’s hazy on an exact number)

Hiryuu: 26

Abi: 24

Zeno: 17

Ha-kun: 18

So everyone but Zeno is older than canon, not counting Hiryuu, since he doesn’t have an age listed. Think I hit the age order, even if Guen, Abi, and Shuten are older.

So, reading ahead, I’ve realized the massive comedy I’ll have to cut by virtue of having Hak and Yona already together. But I still have Shin-ah and Ayumi…(horned halo)

As for Nadai rendering Kouka dependent on Kai, that’s pretty much what happened to China during the Opium Wars time period. Opium even became accepted in lieu of cash, despite official bans. It was only when the trade stopped being as valuable to the British that the international trade between both countries ended. China still had the domestic trade to deal with, and all the farmers who had switched to growing opium because it was more valuable.

They haven’t said what Nadai is made of, right? Cuz traditionally, ‘narcotic’ referred to opium and its derivatives, while in the US today, ‘narcotic’ as a legal term refers to any drug completely banned or used in contradiction to government regulation. In medicine originally, ‘narcotic’ means any psychoactive compound with sleep-inducing products, while now, according to the NIH website, it’s another term for ‘opioid pain relievers’. I’m going to presume for now that calling Nadai a narcotic means it’s possibly opiate based. Only trouble is it apparently doesn’t make the user sleepy…(head desk bang).

Thank you for tolerating the nerd portion of our program. If I can, I want the Happy Hungry Bunch to find out how it’s made, and get more information on it, since at the moment, info is limited to what they’ve learned in Shisen.
“So what’s the plan?” Kija asked as Yun went to ask if Yona, Jaeha, and Zeno could perform at this particular tavern.

“We need to see if we can gain information from the addicts—“ Yona was cut off as Shin-ah tapped her shoulder. “Eh?”

There was a trio of young women staring at them. The one in the middle matched the description her spirits had given her of the girl who had been following them yesterday.

Once her attention was on them fully, they panicked.

“Huh? What was that about?” Yona questioned with a blink, watching the trio of young women Shin-ah had noticed watching them turn around and run.

“Want me to follow them?” Shin-ah asked.

“No…” Yona was distracted as Yun returned.

“Are you sure about wearing this?” Hak asked for the umpteenth time, eyeing all the skin he was usually the only one to see.

The costume consisted of a short jacket, a wraparound skirt, and breast bindings, plus a broad flat hat. It was mostly the breast binding/short jacket combo that was bothering him. Even if nature of the skirt meant you could see her legs.

“Will you stop asking me that?!” Yona growled, fed up with the repeated questioning.

Hak opened his mouth to protest, but a finger to his lips cut him off. “If you stop complaining, I’ll let you see if you can make me come just from fondling my breasts.” She whispered to him, a light blush and a naughty smile on her face.

The fan he was about to hand her slipped from his grasp as the words processed.

Satisfied, she picked up the fan and went out to perform. Every one of her dragons seemed to be studiously avoiding her eyes…and her bare belly.

To be honest, she was a little uncomfortable with the amount of skin showing, but she forced herself to ignore it. The most important bits were covered, and I can’t betray any insecurity as I dance.

Remembering Jae-ha’s words about being a ‘happy’ dancer, drawing out the darkness of Nadai, she took a deep breath and began to dance.

(Ao, puzzled by the dark dragon man’s lack of response, shoved a nut in his mouth, then had to quickly dart to its rescue when he spat it out. Why were humans so distracted by tits?)

As she danced, the more Yona felt like a torch in pitch-black night. It was like the addiction most of the observers suffered from was taking on life of its own, a black cloud encircling her flame.
She spotted the girl from before, being harassed by an addict, who was growing more and more violent. Everyone else was too far away to reach her quickly. Whirling her way to the pair, she flicked her tessen closed, to strike the addict on the head with its full weight, following up with a sweeping kick that was half danced based, half copied from Jaeha.

“Are you okay?” She asked, concerned.

The girl, her nose turning red and dripping blood, stared up at her like she couldn’t figure out what she was doing there. “Can you stand?” Yona asked gently, helping her rise to her feet and stand. “Let’s get your nose looked at, okay?”

She had barely started in Yun’s direction when the addict rose to his feet with a groan. “I thought you beat him…” The girl remarked in a daze.

“I thought right, it didn’t affect him that much…” Yona noted with a grimace.

“You leapt in even though you’re weak?!”

“Of course; your nose was bleeding.” Yona explained.

“Wha—my nose isn’t bleeding!” The girl protested, rubbing at the blood trail.

“Don’t rub it!” Yona scolded.

Darkness suddenly rose up, and hands grabbed her arms and hair. “C’mon dancing girl; dance some more.” The addict grabbing her hair implored.

I can’t dance if you’re grabbing me! Some small part of her brain protested as she swallowed back her rising disgust as a hand of darkness grabbed at her neck, in a cruel mockery of a lover’s caress.

The fire rose, turning her skin burning hot, but Nadai’s claim on the offender was too strong from him to notice the burns on his hand.

Her mind racing as she tried to figure out how she could break free, she noted screams and the sound of shattering pottery. Seeing the man with the broken bottle advancing on the girl, Yona struggled harder. “RUN!”

The girl had scarcely turned to do that when Zeno leapt onto the man, wrapping his limbs around his head.

For some reason, Ao was clinging to Zeno’s hair.

“MISS RUN!” Zeno yelled as the man dislodged him, sending him into a couple tables. “If ya wanna punch somethin’ then get over here!”

This was, thankfully, enough to draw the man’s attention, as the girl seemed only able to tremble and pant.

Yona felt the wolf come up behind one of the addicts holding her, taking his head in his claws. “You’d best let go, if you don’t want your head crushed.” Kija vowed.

“Can I cut him Yona?” Shin-ah asked, hovering menacingly over another addict.

“I said no cutting! Or killing!” She reminded both of them, as Jaeha and Hak knocked out the last of the hands grabbing her.
“Where the hell do you get away with saying that after assaulting one of your customers?” Hak rumbled, the dark fire rolling.

“Really; just what did they teach you as a princess?” Jaeha agreed, equally annoyed.

“The kick? I tried to copy you Jaeha.” She said.

“So YOU’RE the bad influence.” Hak decided, glaring at Jaeha.

“No wonder it was beautiful then!” Jaeha’s attitude completely turned around with hearing that she was copying him.

“Oi you two; stop all the people rampaging in here!” Yun yelled from his refuge under a table as Hak slipped his outer robe on Yona, as much out of possessiveness as to replace the costume’s short robe, which wasn’t really meant for general wear. “Grab the ones that look like they’re addicts! And make sure they can answer questions!”

“He doesn’t want much, does he?” Hak complained as he and Jaeha joined Shin-ah and Kija in handling the riot, Yun yelling reminders to not hurt the people too much.

Zeno darted around the edge of the riot, knocking people out. His control over his power had reached a point where he could use any kind of injury to generate scales, even blunt force, and keep them hidden under his clothes.

After knocking out two men who were using the chaos to steal, he spotted a couple in an alcove created from knocked over tables. The woman’s screams for help as the man pulled at her clothes were lost in the roar of the brawl. Narrowing his eyes, he had reached them and punched the man’s spine before they realized he was there, shattering it.

Experience told Zeno the man would be paralyzed at minimum, but he really didn’t care as he pulled the man off the woman, the woman bolting for exit.

The riot/brawl coming under control, Yona went to the girl, who was huddled in a corner. “Are you alright?” She asked gently, Ao ready with a nut to offer her.

The girl jumped violently, eyes wide as she panted. “Deep breath in…deep breath out…deep breath in…” Yona guided her in calming her breathing. “You’re safe. The people causing all the commotion are gone.”

The girl broke down crying. This is what I’d be like, if I couldn’t remember being him-me, wouldn’t it? She reflected as she hugged the girl, her shoulder growing wet as hands fist ed in Hak’s robe. Isolated from all the pain and suffering outside the castle, Father’s murder at Su-won’s hand, if that me saw it, would have shattered me. I hope Hak would still have been at the side of the me I could have been, supporting her as she pulled back together…

The girl was tensely embarrassed as Yun tended her nose. “Even if they were high on Nadai, hitting a lady…I should have hit them harder.” Jaeha rued as Yona returned, dressed in her usual clothes.

She and Yun would have to come up with a different costume for her to perform in, if only to keep Hak calm.

Not that he had any objections whatsoever to her wearing it for his private viewing pleasure.

“Luckily, your nose wasn’t broken. Put this on it twice a day for five days, and the swelling will go
down.” Yun diagnosed, handing her the tiny bottleful of the medicine he had put on her nose.

“That’s good to hear…” The girl’s pride seemed dented, like she was cursing herself for breaking down in front of other people.

“What’s your name?” Yona asked. “You had been watching us earlier, right? How come?”

The girl looked stunned, like she hadn’t expected to be called on it. “Sh-shouldn’t you introduce yourselves first?” She countered. “You’re suspicious! Wearing strange clothes and investigating stuff! I was starting to think you’re really a dancer, but then you flying kick someone out of nowhere!”

One heartbeat, then another. “It was you, Yona-chan.” Jaeha decided.

“Eh?! You’re the one wearing Kai-style clothing!” Yona protested.

“Definitely Shin-ah’s mask.” Kija considered, (carefully) stroking his chin with his dragon hand, utterly ignorant still in how unusual his village’s style of clothing was.

“ALL of you look suspicious.” Yun reminded them, unamused.

“My name is Yona. We’ve been travelling around the country, and when we learned of the drug problem in Water, we decided to investigate.” Yona explained.

“Yona…the same name as the missing princess…wait, one of the guys called you ‘Hime’…”

“Since she has the same name, we call her ‘Hime’ as a joke.” Yun covered, only slightly nervous as he had expected this question to come up sooner or later.

“Speak for yourself. I call her ‘Hime’ because that’s what she is to me, regardless of her actual position in life.” Hak declared as he returned, a dusting of a blush on his cheekbones as Yona turned red.

(This made Lili’s much-denied romantic side squeal.)

“I tied up the addicts causing the most fuss up, but they keep asking for more. Definitely heavy users, especially when you add in the state of the teeth and nails.” Hak reported, distracting the girl as Kija tried apologizing for his ‘careless words’.

“Don’t apologize Kija.” Yona whispered to him, pulling him to his feet.

“Anyway, a few got Nadai from random places, but most are getting it at ‘Suirei’.” Hak continued. “That’s where you and Zeno had gone, right?” He asked Jaeha.

“We have to go there; Zeno can tell us where it is, since Jaeha’s been tightlipped about it.” Yun noted.

“…fine. But once we’re there, all of you will have to listen to everything I say.” Jaeha reluctantly conceded.

“So tomorrow we’ll do a raid—” Yun started.

“The girls are victims of this as much as those guys are. We need to sneak in and explore first.” Jaeha cut off Yun, jerking a thumb at the tied up addicts.

“H-hold on a minute!” The girl piped up. “Just what are you planning?”
“We’re going to the store that looks to be the main distribution point, find the ringleader, and stop the operation here in Shisen.” Yona told her.

The look of stunned disbelief told Yona everything that was running through her mind. Higher quality clothes…how she panicked and froze during the attack…her sense of wounded pride… “Is something wrong? Is it your nose?” She asked, mainly to keep from asking the question she really wanted to ask.

“None…none of you are from Shisen, are you?” The girl asked. “Why are you sticking your neck out for this town, when it’s so dangerous? You’re not strong, but you still do a flying kick. I don’t understand you.”

“I DO need to practice my kicks.” Yona reminded herself.

“No one’s saying you need to practice that! Are you really going to that store?” The girl demanded.

“You asked why I’m sticking my neck out for Shisen, despite none of us having a connection to it.” Yona began, not quite dodging the last question, yet sensing she needed to explain things to this girl. “I’m sticking my neck out for those who have no one to do that for them. I will not turn a blind eye to the suffering of others, not when I’m willing to do something about it. Nadai is a poison tainting the well, and if it’s not stopped, before long the whole water supply will be tainted.”

Something about how Yona spoke made Lili feel like she was in the presence of someone powerful. Not powerful in theory, like her father seemed to be, but actually powerful, and willing to use that power. “But are you really going to go to that store?” She asked again.

“Well, I personally won’t be going, this time—“

“Hime-san, you aren’t—wait, you’re NOT diving into danger?!?” Hak felt Yona’s forehead. “You feelin’ okay?”

“Shut up Hak.” She grumbled. “As Yun loves reminding us, we stand out. With my hair, there’s no chance in hell of me sneaking into the girls unnoticed. So have a guy’s night out!” The last sentence was said with exaggerated perkiness.

“Yona-chan has a point, once we’re done travelling it’s not like you’ll be able to—“ Jaeha was cut off with a fist to his face. “Kija just makes the cut, Shin-ah’s out—“ Shin-ah radiated relief, remembering how the girls at the market had fawned after the brief glimpse of his eyes “—Zeno—“

“—will stay behind. He didn’t drink anything, and was the ‘responsible’ one, so it’d be suspicious if he goes with you. He’ll keep the others company!” Zeno chimed.

“Wait, what kind of store is this?” The girl asked, confused.

“A brothel.” The Dark Dragon and the Happy Hungry Bunch chorused, making the girl turn red as they used the actual term and not dodging the issue.

“Lili-sama!” The other two women from earlier called as they ran over, giving Yona the last piece she needed.

“We’ve been looking all over for you! Did you sneak out to spy on those handsome men from earlier?” The woman with lighter hair asked, before she and her partner noticed ‘Lili-sama’s’ red nose and the rising bruise.

“Which one of you was it? I’ll be sure to return the courtesy three times over.” Her partner with
black hair vowed, drawing her twin short blades.

Despite how nearly all of them could easily take both women at once, Yona’s dragons quaked.

“T-there was a commotion, and they helped me out!” Lili countered as she tugged on the one’s sleeve.

“Thank you for looking after Lili-sama!” The pair chorused as they bowed to the dragons.

“I’m glad you have friends that came for you. You’ll make it home safely now.” Yona remarked, Ao still determined for Lili to accept her nut.

“I can get home fine by myself.” Lili grumbled as she started stalking off. “Ayura! Tetora! We’re leaving!”

“Coming!” This command broke the staring exchange between the two women and Hak, who looked like he knew who the women were, but couldn’t place the connection. “Let’s go back to Suiko, yes?” Tetora (?) suggested as the trio walked off into the night.

After Zeno and Shin-ah had retrieved their bags from the inn, Hak quickly set up the smaller tent and hurried Yona inside. “Guess he REALLY liked her costume.” Jaeha said, shaking his head as the flap was secured.

“Okay, we’ll take turns looking after the addicts. I’ll go first, but if you think any of them is in medical trouble, wake me up, okay?” Yun decided.

The others nodded in agreement.

“I know I’ve seen those women before. Outside of Wind, there’s not that many female fighters.” Hak complained, shrugging off his robes.

“I’m pretty sure that girl is An Lili, daughter of the Water General An Jun-gi.” Yona said, neatly folding her cloak, vest, and sashes. “Those must be her bodyguards; he’s as overprotective as Father had been…”

Hak stopped her when she was halfway through pulling her dress off. “?” Pushing her down gently, he pushed the front of her dress over her head, but shoved it behind her head, leaving her arms still trapped in her sleeves. Straddling her, she could feel his dick pressed against her abdomen, too high for her to grind her mound against it. “You did say just from fondling your breasts.” He reminded her, the touch of a question within the possessiveness of the dark fire.

She swallowed, her heart racing and heat gathering just from the thought of being at his mercy. “So I’m the dragon hoard tonight?” She asked breathlessly, relaxing beneath him in silent consent.

He leaned down and kissed her deeply, their tongues dancing as his hand caressed the spot on her neck where she had been grabbed earlier. The memory of that taint purged, he ended the kiss, pulling back as that hand trailed down to her breasts, cupping the left one. His other hand moving to cup the right one, she bit her lip against a groan as he thumbed her nipples.

Her eyes slid shut as the hands left, to be replaced with phantom touches. She arched her back in an effort to feel them better, a dark chuckle going right to her mound.

She only half-managed to contain a scream as a hot, wet tongue tasted her left nipple. Tasting the
right for good measure, he began a steady exploration of her left breast with his mouth, kissing with a hint of teeth any and every spot that generated a response. His hand came up to keep her right breast from being neglected as she fisted her hands in her dress and tried not to squirm too much.

The trust she gave with her surrender was as much a part of the game as his actions were, and with all she demanded and took, in and out of this intimate world, it was only fair she gave back some small measure of that.

The fact that giving in to his possessiveness made her wet just thinking about it was a very big bonus.

She jumped when he switched to her other breast, distracted by her thoughts. “If you’re able to think I’m not doing enough.” He said, mouth hovering over the peak of her right nipple, making her shiver.

“Depends on what I’m thinking of—” Her words turned into a moan as his lips found an especially sensitive spot on the underside of her right breast, sending a pulse of fire to her nub.

The pulses continued as he added teeth, his hand caressing the marks he had left on her other breast. It became impossible to not squirm as his nails reminded her about a spot on the side of her left breast. She tried to move her hips, aiming for some friction on her nub, but it was useless.

It hit her that she was dependent on him to permit her orgasm, and Heavens above if that concept alone wasn’t enough to tip her over on its own.

But that wasn’t in the game. “Hak—“ She cried, brimming with fire and barely aware of the pleading note in her voice.

Wet heat returned to her left nipple, and sucked.

The sucking continued throughout her orgasm, like he was drawing it out of her. She didn’t bother biting back her whine when his weight left, freeing her.

Yona’s eyes (when was the last time she had opened them?) were greeted by Hak’s self-satisfied smirk, cat-like smugness and dragon possessiveness and male pride all in one.

Opening her mouth, she closed it when she couldn’t think of anything to say.

Sitting up, she untangled from her dress. Crawling over to him, he already had his dick in hand, intending to take care of things himself. He cocked an eyebrow as she straddled his hips, nestling his dick in her wet folds. “Not inside. But I want to feel you.” She spoke against his lips as she started moving, no real plan beyond feeling him in the most intimate way she dared.

His hands helped as they kissed, somehow unhurried despite the increasing pace. He tensed, and as his seed flowed between the cheeks of her ass, she was only vaguely surprised as a second, weaker, orgasm pulsed through her.

As he held her and they basked in the moment, sounds from outside started to register. “I know Yun would like to find out if Nadai has any positive use, but given the severity of the withdrawal? No way.” She said with a shake of her head.

“I can’t imagine any positive use for it. Between Droopy Eyes and those guys…” He agreed, helping her clean up enough to put her dress back on.

With how the touch of cloth against her tender breasts sent sparks down her spine, she wondered
how she’ll manage to get to sleep, with every movement shifting the cloth and making sparks.

Wisely, he let her decide their sleeping positions.

Chapter End Notes

…happy summer?...

Another hard-ish chapter, being Lili-focused in the manga.

Why didn’t anyone tell me I had Shin-ah leaving the room twice in chapter 37!? He isn’t anymore, but still…!

Not sure how or why I have ‘teahouse’ as a euphemism for ‘brothel’ in this story, but also too lazy to go back and change that.
Lili laid still, to keep from disturbing Ayura and Tetora. Her body was demanding rest after the stress of the evening, but her mind raced. *I guess those guys aren’t drug smugglers…but should I really rule that out? I mean, who just gets involved in something dangerous because it’s the right thing to do?*

Her gut told her that thinking of them as drug smugglers was ridiculous; they all stood out too much.

Then there was the girl, Yona. *I’ve never even heard of a girl like her! She’s my age, and weak, but she came to my aid without thinking! Most of the time she seemed like a normal girl, but a couple of times, she seemed like someone else. Someone older, and powerful. Powerful and willing to use the power at her disposal.*

And those guys! Even if they were boys by her standards, they were still very nice-looking. *I wonder if she’s involved with any of them? The dark haired guy for sure, probably, but a girl traveling with six guys… Her cheeks burned as she pictured Yona in some of the stories she had stolen from Tetora, which had a girl ‘attended’ by multiple guys. Probably not, that kind of thing doesn’t actually happen in real life.*

*I should go back tomorrow and see if I can learn more about them.* Lili decided. Rolling over, she was just about to fall asleep when something Yona had said processed. “Wait…what did she mean by ‘this time’?”

“*You’re the girl from last night.*” Yona commented, the girl she was pretty sure was An Lili resembling a startled deer, holding a branch in each hand.

“What a coincidence! We’re running into each other a lot, aren’t we?” Lili dropped to her knees and hurriedly stuck the branches in the ground.

“Lili-sama, you’re the suspicious-looking one.” Her two bodyguards pointed out, apparently very used to such antics.

“What are you doing out here?” Lili asked, having honestly not expected to run into the group in the same place she had left them last night.

“Our budget couldn’t afford another night in the inn, so we camped out.” Yona explained, leading the way back to the main tent, where Yun had set everyone on the morning chores. “Hi Lili-chan, Ayura-chan, Tetora-chan.” Jaeha greeted as he returned with an armful of wood.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Lili remarked, stunned.

“Nope, it’s the truth.”

“THE POOR ARE INCREDIBLE!” Lili exclaimed, a little horrified.

“We’re not that incredible.” Zeno demurred as he and Shin-ah bowed.

“It’s not meant as a compliment.” Abi pointed out, Yun echoing the same statement.
“I can’t believe it! You’re a girl yet you can camp surrounded by guys in a place like this?!” Lili couldn’t decide if she was amazed by this, or weirded out.

“We’re all friends. And we’ve already taken down the tent Hak and I sleep in.” Yona answered.

“You’re REALLY sharing a tent?!”

“Of course; he’s my fiancé, so why shouldn’t I share a tent with him?” Yona asked, playing baffled while she tried not to laugh at Lili’s expressions.

(Tetora had to hurriedly wipe her nose as she thought of the implication.)

“But—what about bugs—“ Kija jumped, looking around frantically “—and the ground’s hard—!”

“It’s a lot better here than the mountains.” Yona assured her. “Besides, this way, we could look after the people from the riot.”

Lili turned and finally noticed the five men tied up. “Several were picked up by their families, but this group’s been here all night.” Yona said, approaching the men with a couple water flasks. “It’s water.”

_Aren’t these the men that grabbed her last night? How can she give them water like this?!_ Lili wondered as she watched Yona go down the line, giving the men water and taking care that they didn’t choke. “Didn’t…didn’t he grab you last night? Aren’t you scared?”

“He had been hallucinating last night, of killing his own family. He’s been crying the last few hours.” Yona said quietly, her face sad and her eyes ancient. “That’s why…I want to help them. Even if their frail hearts are being controlled by Nadai.”

Lili felt her eyes tearing up as the man started calling for his mother, apologizing. “Unfortunately, we had to keep them tied up most of the night, to keep them from hurting themselves or each other.” Yona added. “At times, it might have made it worse, but there was no other choice.”

“How are they getting their hands on it?” Lili asked. _I doubt that any of them set out to take Nadai…_

“The brothel, Suirei, mixes Nadai into the ‘house wine’ and burn it with the incense. They either didn’t know what they were drinking, or they had no choice about drinking it.” Jaeha informed her.

_One drug destroyed these people? How can Father ignore this? How can anyone turn their heads? Is there even a cure to be had?_ “What will you do while your friends are raiding the…store?” Lili asked quietly.

“I’ll be here, looking after them.” Yona answered. “We already checked the clinics. They’re so full that it’s a minimum of twenty five thousand rin for even one night. We forfeited everything we might have earned last night to help pay for the damages from the riot. If we use our emergency fund, we could get one person in for a night, but how would we choose?”

_Why is she going this far? Why is she willing to do so much for a land she has no connection to? Why…_ Lili dug her nails into her palms. _…why has one group of travelling entertainers with limited resources done more to fight Nadai than a General with the resources of the whole Tribe? “Ayura, get these men into the clinics. For now, I’ll pay the clinics enough so they don’t need to charge people to get in. You and your guys will lodge at the inn I’m staying in.”_ Lili ordered.

_“Why…?”_ Yona asked, a bit bewildered as Ayura and Tetora (she was sure of who was who now) did as Lili ordered, Kija and Jaeha helping them with the addicts.
“It’s thanks for the flying kick last night! Please accept my gratitude!” Lili replied.

“That will really help.” Hak remarked.

“Don’t mention it. All of you helped Lili-sama out.” Ayura waved it off with a slight bow.

“Maybe you can get some lessons on femininity.” Hak said slyly.

Yona didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, with a sultry look and a smirk, she countered, “Oh? I don’t recall hearing any complaints about my femininity last night…”

Realizing his taunt backfired, Hak turned red, remembering last night. “I take that back.” He said wisely.

“There’s a hot spring at the inn too.” Tetora added with a giggle over her shoulder as she and Ayura departed for the nearest clinic.

Jaeha perked up. “Then I’ll—“

“Investigation now; hot spring later.” Hak shut down as he grabbed Jaeha’s ponytail. “We’ll be back soon, Hime-san.”

“Be careful.” Yona wished, and she leaned up and he leaned down and the feeling the kiss gave off made Lili blush and turn away, feeling like an intruder.

“I’ve never stayed at an inn this beautiful before.” Yona remarked as she joined Lili, Ayura, and Tetora in the hot spring. Kaya and Ao were also enjoying it.

Then she noticed the bruises. “Why are you covered in bruises? I thought you hadn’t been grabbed that much…”

“These? I’m learning sword arts. I’m still pretty bad at it, as you can see.” Yona replied, gesturing at her bruises. Of course, when you’re judging yourself against a past life of the opposite gender and decades of practice, anyone would look bad.

“You’ve got six handsome and pretty guys ready to protect you, yet you’re still learning to fight?” Lili couldn’t understand it.

Yona blinked. “Of course. If they’re always protecting me, they’re more likely to get hurt. If I can protect myself, then one day I can protect them.” Her eyes turned distant. “Hak…he nearly died protecting me once before, and Shin-ah got stabbed by bandits in Fire. Any power or skill out there, that will let me protect the ones I love, I’ll use.”

Lili felt her breath catch in her throat at the fierce look on Yona’s face, and her fiery eyes. Looking away, she noticed something…odd.

Lili couldn’t help staring at Yona’s breasts, trying to decide if she should comment on the…unusual…nature of the bruises there. “…are those…?” She trailed off, face turning as bright as Yona’s hair.

“Hak kept complaining and asking if I was okay with my dance outfit, so I told him that if he
stopped complaining I’d let him see if he could make me climax just from playing with my breasts.” Yona explained bluntly, to Lili’s embarrassment.

“Did you?” Tetora asked, leaning forward.

Yona flushed a bit, even as a very satisfied smile graced her face. “To be fair, repeat testing is needed to properly establish the validity but…” The telling way she let the sentence trail off said far, far more than any amount of words could.

“Oh my.” Tetora demurely covered her mouth with her hand as she ran through the scenario in her head.

The question of bruises dealt with, Lili turned to the other nagging issue. “Now,” Lili jabbed a finger at Kaya. “Who are you?”

“You can see me/her?” Yona and Kaya asked at the same time. “We haven’t really run into many people who can.”

“Yeah, ever since I was little I could see ghosts.” Lili replied. “Ayura and Tetora could after they’d been with me for a few years.”

“I’m Kaya, Zeno’s wife.” This drew a response that wasn’t completely unexpected. “MARRIED/WIFE!?!?!?” Ayura, Tetora, and Lili yelled. “He doesn’t look old enough to have been married!” Lili blurted out.

Yona bit her lip to keep a straight face.

“I had already reached the blood coughing stage of consumption when we met, so…” Kaya shrugged with a sad smile.

“So it’s not like you two were married.” There was an emphasis on the last word as Ayura gave up all pretense of aloofness and joined in the spirit of ‘girl talk’.

Kaya blinked. “Of course we were married.” She protested, repeating the emphasis. “It wasn’t very often, but our marriage was still consummated. Plus I can enter his dreams.” This last part was said with a sly smile. “So we’re still married.”

“I can’t imagine loving someone enough to stay with them after I die.” Tetora admitted.

“Does he know you’re haunting him?” Lili asked.

Kaya nodded. “He didn’t at first, but after a while, he realized I was still with him.” She said as Ao swam past.

“What’s it like? I mean, my mother’s old maids are always cackling about wedding nights and wifely duties now that I’m old enough, but you’re both about my age, right?” Lili asked. “Some of the stuff I read just sounds so…weird.”

“I know you’ve been stealing my books, Lili-sama.” Tetora piped up. “I must admit that sometimes the authors can run rather loose with their metaphors and comparisons.”

Ayura rolled her eyes. Technically speaking, ‘inappropriate topics’ were part of what she and Tetora were meant to be guarding against, but if her years of service to Lili had taught her anything, it was that trying to keep Lili from something only guaranteed her interest in it.
Yona and Kaya shared a look. “Hmmm…” Yona hummed with a frown. *How can I describe it? A fire analogy wouldn’t be unusual, would it?*

“Each time, it feels special.” Kaya finally began. “After I got sick, and isolated myself from others so I wouldn’t spread it, I had given up on things I had once dreamed of, like marriage. Some part of me still kind of expects to wake up in my hut, having dreamed of all of this. As for the actual experience…” Everyone huddled together, like Kaya was about to reveal a secret teaching. “It kinds of feels like a display of trust, letting him in. Sometimes, I can feel his heartbeat while he’s inside of me. When he’s moving, I don’t want it to end, but I do, because it ends when he comes and then I have a part of him inside of me that no one can take away. Even when it’s just his fingers or tongue, the sensations are weird, but good weird. It might just be me, but the sensations almost make me think of sunshine on your skin, when you first come out of a cold dark place and into the sun.”

“Fire, for me.” Yona said. “It’s like my blood’s turned to fire, and it gathers in my breasts and my mound. You would think that it would feel like any other kind of touch between two people, but it’s not, because everything’s more sensitive and responsive. But Kaya’s right about how it feels like a display of trust, because you’re trusting him to…care of you?…as you fall apart.”

“The maids never said anything about that. It’s all about satisfying him; like you’re supposed to be satisfied by satisfying him. What I’ve read I’m not sure I believe, but that describes actions, not what it feels like, emotionally.” Lili remarked.

“K-I think Zeno might get more out of satisfying me than satisfying himself. But he’s really enjoyed it, when it’s been focused on satisfying him. I DID get a lot out of satisfying him with my mouth, but I can’t say that would be enough for me.” Kaya pondered, Yona nodding in agreement next to her. “I know the expectation is for it to be all about the man, but all take and no give isn’t very healthy.” Yona added.


“I have no complaints.” Kaya and Yona chorused, only to look at each other and laugh.

(Unknown to the girls, Hak and Zeno each sneezed at that moment.)

“It was a bit intimidating, when I first saw it. But when the time came, I didn’t really care.” Yona admitted. “But I think that what matters more is how he uses it, not how big it is.”

“We better get out before we turn into prunes.” Ayura decided as she exited the hot spring.

Su-won didn’t bother containing the dirty look he gave the recent memo from Kei-shuk, suggesting he do something about the rumors of Hiryuu-ou returning to kill Kan Su-jin for high treason, and say something about the rumors of Hak being the one behind King Il’s murder and Yona’s disappearance. He was alone, so it wasn’t like he had to play nice. “Considering you want me to dismiss the rumors of Hiryuu-ou and hint at the validity of the rumors about Hak, forget it.”

*Now, would it be better to claim ignorance, or say I spilled something on this and had to discard it without reading?* He wondered as he held the memo to the flame of the lamp, watching it turn to ashes.

*If only he wasn’t such a good organizer…* After making sure every scrap of the memo was ash, Su-won turned to Yona’s notes on Water. After her ponderings on if Nadai would be grounds for war with Southern Kai, page after dense page was filled with legal minutiae, laying out every law, precedent, and decree that would justify action against the Koukan-based drug dealers without offending Southern Kai merchants. “I wonder who she had help her with this? I doubt she had enough time to compile this by herself.”
Deciding against going through the forest of legal technicalities to confirm for himself, he pulled out Yona’s book. He may have no intention of seeking the power of uncaring gods over the concrete power of men, but realizing that Yona really was Hiryuu-ou reborn and knew it had rekindled his youthful fascination in the Dragon Warriors.

Flipping open to where he had left off translating, he groaned when he saw a few blank pages between Hiryuu-ou making some kind of realization about Ouryuu Zeno’s power and where the writing continued. When the writing continued, there was a note along the top of the page.

Hiryuu: 28
Guen: 32
Shuten: 28-32
Abi: 26
Zeno: 19
Ha-kun: 20

Ha-kun.

The name of someone important to Hiryuu-ou, and who Hak had been in a previous life. “I know I really should be more doubtful about reincarnation, but I can’t be, after everything I’ve seen.” Picking up his brush, Su-won dove back into the past.

“So how likely is it that Kaze will join Kouka?” Zeno asked as they rode towards Fuuga, the capital of the province of Kaze.

“I’m not really sure. They’re pretty easy-going, but only idiots cross them.” Hiryuu replied, shifting a little in the saddle.

“Isn’t the leader supposed to be a woman?” Shuten asked.

“Yes. As the only surviving child of the previous leader, she was taught all the things a male child would. There is a brother, but he’s a lot younger than her and has frail health.” Abi explained.

“Wait…I remember hearing about a ‘Lightning Dame’ in Kaze who struck lightning-fast. I wonder if that’s her?” Guen wondered as they reached the gates of Fuuga.

They could only stare at the pair of guards leaning against each other, fast asleep. “Uhh…do we just go in?” Hiryuu asked. “Or should we wake them up?”

Before any of his dragons (or himself) could make a move, over a dozen blurs flew by, waking the guards up. They ended up pinned to the wall by small...throwing knives (?), adorned with black feathers at the end.

“How many times must I say it: NO NAPPING ON GATE DUTY!!!!” A small person dressed in blue leapt down from the roof of a nearby building. The softness of the features and the curve of the hips said it was a woman. She had black hair messily tied up in a braided bun, blue eyes, and wore a blue short robe and unusually, pants. “Especially when you KNEW we had people coming!” She berated as she stalked closer.

Hiryuu found himself bizarrely drawn to watching the way her hips moved as she approached.
“Tae-u, Han-dae, how the hell do the two of you keep ending up on gate duty?”

The pair didn’t have an answer. Sighing, she retrieved her daggers. “Ayame, keep these idiots awake.” She ordered, before focusing on Hiryuu and his dragons.

Hiryuu’s mouth went dry as her eyes flicked them over. “So you’re the Crimson Dragon King and his Dragons.” She remarked in lieu of a greeting. “I am Ha-kun, Leader of Kaze.” The way her posture changed slightly, drawing herself up a fraction more, made it seem like she expected some kind of derisive comment.

“Yes, I am Hiryuu, King of Kouka, and these are my Dragon Warriors.” He returned her greeting politely, with a slight smile as he dismounted.

While her face stayed neutral, her eyes showed surprise before flying away. “I’ll be blunt. The only way land in Kaze can be transferred from one family line to another is by marriage. And marriage can only happen if the person who wants the land wins against the owner of the land, or their champions, in the event they cannot fight. You want Kaze to join your kingdom. While the benefits are massive, it still must be done in a way to satisfy the clans. So,”

She crossed her arms. “Either we can do weeks of delicate negotiations to decide all the particulars of the fight, before entering into more negotiations on what the fight would decide, or we can just go ahead and fight now.”

“We?” He was pretty sure his voice didn’t squeak.

“The two of us, as the chief parties involved, can go ahead and settle it now. As a courtesy, you may substitute one of your Dragons to fight in your place if you don’t feel up to the challenge.” She informed him.

“As this was all my idea, it would be poor form for me not to fight.” He told her. “And should I lose?”

“You can try your luck next year. The training ground’s this way. Kota, tend to the horses.” With this last order, she headed to said training ground, not looking back to see if he was following.

“This’ll be a hoot and a half.” Shuten snickered under his breath as they followed.

Thankfully, Abi decided against reacting.

Hiryuu found himself getting nervous for some reason. Probably the same reason he was desperately wishing he could see just how well those pants fitted her hips.

A crowd was gathering on the edges of the training ground as they arrived. Handing Guen his cloak, Guen said, “If you get your ass kicked badly I’m laughing.”

“Thanks for the confidence.” Hiryuu said flatly.

Ha-kun bowed to an older man with white hair. “Grandfather.”

He nodded in acknowledgement. It struck Hiryuu as odd, but then he remembered that in Kaze, you didn’t wish a fighter good luck before battle.

He had his sword.

She had an unknown number of throwing knives and had grabbed a polearm he thought was called
a naginata.

Settling into a ready stance, he waited for the sign to start the battle.

Chapter End Notes

…was the playtime in the last chapter not to everyone’s liking? I know it’s summer and people are on vacation and all…

My head has decided that Tetora is a complete closet pervert. With ‘literature’ of questionable value that Lili steals and reads.
“What are the conditions for a win?” He asked.

“Forfeit by one of the fighters, or a point is reached where death would result.” She answered, as the white-haired man she greeted as ‘Grandfather’ rose and took the match observer position.

“I am Il-deok, Elder of Kaze. On my mark you may begin.” He introduced himself as he raised his hand.

“Begin.”

They leapt towards each other, exchanging a few blows before pulling back. Ha-kun was definitely fast, faster than he was. But she was also smaller and lighter than he was, meaning he could win if he conserved his movements and waited for her to stop running circles around him. Their reach ended up roughly equal, his height and sword putting his reach just shy of hers with her naginata.

They slowly circled, the quiet chatter of the crowd mostly relating to betting on the outcome. “I do hope you’re not planning to wait for me to exhaust myself running around you.” She said with a faint smirk.

He was, but he wasn’t about to confirm that. “I guess we’ll just have to see who has more patience.” He countered, moving to slash at her.

Smoothly dodging, she dropped into a sweeping kick that he somehow managed to jump over. Blocking an upward slash, he couldn’t completely disguise his shock that there was more strength to it than he expected, which made her smirk.

The fight fell into a flurry of steel, him entering a zone that felt more like practicing kata then a fight, where he didn’t think, just did.

Meaning that afterwards, he didn’t quite know how he won. His sword was a hair’s breath from beheading her, while her blade could take his leg. “Yield.” Ha-kun said quietly, pulling back her naginata with an unreadable look in her eyes.

Withdrawing his sword, he was sheathing it as she dropped to her knees. Pulling some kind of pendant crest off, she offered it up with the naginata, bowed low. “Having lawfully defeated me, my lands, my people, my body, and my life are eternally yours. By your honor, you have my eternal fidelity.” Ha-kun of Kaze said quietly but clearly.

Everyone watching the fight, save for his dragons, knelt and paid homage, accepting the outcome. He accepted the crest and naginata, making a mental note to return at least the later to her at some point. He wasn’t sure if the crest was something he would be allowed to return.

“Shall we retire to discuss the exact details?” Il-deok proposed as Hiryuu held out a hand to help Ha-kun stand.

It was a long moment before she accepted. He figured she had either decided to be polite, or had realized he wasn’t implying some kind of insult.
“OPEN THE LIQUOR CABINET!!! TIME TO CELEBRATE!!!” Il-deok ordered with a cheer, that was quickly taken up by others. “Don’t worry; once we’ve settled on the fine details we can drink until we pass out.” The older man assured him with a slap on his back.

He had a bad feeling about this…

Thankfully, other than a splitting headache the next morning, he didn’t wind up naked on the roof (something he just KNEW Shuten was behind) or dressed in women’s robes (for which Abi had looked too innocent about when asked). The last sure thing he remembered was Shuten passing out, leaving Zeno the dumbfounded winner of the drinking contest that started around bottle number three. “Don’t worry; you spent the night eagle-spread on the floor snoring. You didn’t embarrass yourself in front of your ‘wife’.” Guen assured him after they departed.

While he and Ha-kun were technically married the moment he won and she accepted her loss, they had to wait for the priests and oracles to determine the best day for the actual ceremony. She would go to the castle once that was determined.

“Still…” The morning’s rice wasn’t sitting well. “Do you think she’s HAPPY with all of this?”

“Ou-sama, you know personal feelings aren’t a factor in marriages at this rank, right? Once she bears a son you can have nothing to do with her if you wish.” Abi pointed out.

“With the way he was staring at her and blushing yesterday, he’s not gonna get tired of her.” Shuten noted with a sideways look.

“I-I wasn’t blushing!” Hiryuu protested. “It was the liquor—“

“I was talkin’ before the booze came out.” Shuten revealed.

Face burning, he pulled ahead of his dragons slightly. After a few minutes, Zeno joined him. “She was watching you yesterday. I think she’s as interested in you as you are with her.” The boy assured him. “She’s bound to like you!”

“I guess…” The look of hatred on Zheng’s face hung in his eyelids. “I hope you’re right…”

“Somehow, knowing Hiryuu-ou was as awkward with women as I am is reassuring.” Su-won muttered to himself as he tidied up. “Especially with the vultures circling.” He sighed as he went to bed. “Too bad we’re leaving for Water in the morning; I’d love to continue on…”

“Huh. So you really are learning sword arts.” Lili remarked, petting Ao. “I can’t claim to be any kind of expert, but I don’t think you’re that bad.”

“Lili-sama is right.” Ayura agreed. “Your form is textbook perfect, and your strokes are sure. I can’t speak for the power of your strikes, but your teacher is very good, since you have no wasted movements.”

Yona didn’t even try containing her pleased smile. It’s nice to hear Hak being praised indirectly… and I’m glad him-me was able to help me learn how to apply his training to my body. Even if it was only the movements. “I wonder how things are going…” She wondered out loud.

“You can’t be expecting them back before morning; it IS the red light district.” Lili reminded her,
before looking around for Kaya. “Where’s Kaya?”

“She can’t go too far from Zeno. We must be too far away.” Yona explained. “And I’m not expecting them back soon.”

“Aren’t you worried? Your fiancé at a brothel…” Lili asked, curious as to Yona’s reaction.

“It’s not his scene. Besides,” Yona paused to look over her shoulder at Lili. “We’ve already agreed that should such a thing happen, I’ll be there.”

Tetora only just stopped her nosebleed as Lili and Ayura goggled. “Wha—?”

Yona broke down laughing. “I trust Hak. And anything Kija or Jaeha does isn’t my business.” She admitted through her laughter.

For some reason, this reminded Lili of what she had remembered last night. “Oh yeah!” She exclaimed. “What did you mean when you said ‘this time’? That ‘this time’ you wouldn’t be going?”

Yona looked at Lili, Ayura, and Tetora, considering. “Have you heard of a man named Yan Kum-ji?” She asked.

Tetora tapped a finger on her chin. “Isn’t he the lord in Earth who recently disappeared?” She asked.

“He was lord of the port of Awa.” Yona sat down next to Lili, Ao leaping to her shoulder. “He…was one of the Koukan based drug lords.”

“What?!?!?!?” Lili exclaimed.

“There were rumors of shady dealings that reached here with his ships but…” Ayura revealed.

“That’s not all he was dealing in.” Yona’s eyes were dark. “It’s what he was trading for the drugs that made it worse.”

“Isn’t dealing in Nadai bad enough?!” Lili demanded quietly.

“It would be bad enough.” Yona agreed. “But he was trading people too.”

The others just gaped at her. “He…he was…” Tetora couldn’t voice it.

“From what we learned, the first person he trafficked was his own daughter, after she fell for a man of unsuitable rank and wealth. The whole town lived in fear. Of being taken, or losing a family member. The officials were either threatened into silence, or an active part of Kum-ji’s operation. He took control of the whole fleet, and, as long as he paid what he was supposed to…with the mines being played out, the General’s attention was elsewhere.” Ao curled her tail around Yona’s neck. “Those in Awa’s fleet that didn’t go along with his operation became pirates, only attacking Kum-ji’s ships.”

Lili had barely known Yona a day, but she thought she knew where this was going.

“We were helping the pirates when we learned of a major deal taking place, one where he’d have to be present. But we didn’t have the manpower to search ship by ship, and killing Kum-ji would be meaningless is anymore girls were sold to Kai. So…I decided to sneak into the ‘merchandise’ with a flare, to let the others know which ship. Yun and Ao went with me, since Yun can pass as a girl. Despite not fighting, Yun and I still got beat up the most.” There was a touch of a complaint in this last sentence.
“And it worked?!” Lili exclaimed.

“Kum-ji won’t be peddling another woman, or sending another shipment of Nadai into Water.” Yona assured her with a slight smile.

Why would I not be surprised to learn Yona killed him herself? Ayura and Tetora shared a glance with Lili, conveying the same thought.

“I AM curious about how things are going,” Yona remarked, ignoring the exchange. “Kija’s Baa-Baa has been trying to get him to marry for several years, and he’s the most eligible bachelor in his village.”

“You’re pretty trusting of Hak.” Lili noted. “And what about Jaeha?”

“Hak and I…we’ve known each other for a long time. If I can’t trust him, who can I trust?” Yona asked. “As for Jaeha, while it’s none of my business what he gets up to, he doesn’t mess around when it’s serious.”

With a giggle, Tetora cut in before Lili could continue trying to needle Yona about her attitude involving Hak and a brothel. “It’s good to see that you’ve made a friend, Lili-sama. Ever since you were a girl, you’d start fighting as soon as another girl got close.”

“Huh? We’re not friends!” Lili protested. “Not me and this country girl.”

“She’s right; we’re not friends.” Yet. Yona added in her head, as Lili continued, “I don’t need friends; you and Ayura are enough for when I want to talk to someone.”

“That’s not wise; your father IS paying us.” Ayura reminded her, Tetora nodding in agreement next to her.

“That’s the part you’re supposed to keep quiet about.” Lili grumbled.

“Either way, the moon’s beautiful tonight, so I’ll see about getting tea and sweets.” Tetora suggested, before departing to do just that.

Even with Lili hassling her about Hak in a brothel, Yona was having fun. “This is exciting; I’ve never had many chances for girl talk.” She said cheerfully. “I should get Yun and the others.”

“Huh? You were saying how few chances you’ve had for girl talk and now you’re bringing guys in?!” Lili exclaimed. “Tetora will need to bring even more tea and sweets!”

“I can go—“ Ayura began, before Lili cut her off. “Ayura, wait here, okay?” She called over her shoulder as she followed Yona.

I think Lili-sama is having the most fun of all of us…

“For real, why are you bringing the guys into the sacred space of femininity?” Lili asked once she caught up to Yona.

“Zeno will pout at me when he finds out I got sweets and didn’t share. His pout makes kicked puppies look normal.” Yona answered. “Yun can make pretty much anything once he’s tasted it, and Shin-ah’s hasn’t had a chance for many sweets. I want to make the most of this chance, to have some fun without having to worry. Well, Yun will still worry, but that’s what Yun does.”

“Isn’t he the youngest?” Lili asked.
“Yeah, but he’s the most mature of all of us. We wouldn’t have made it this far without Yun looking after us.” Yona admitted.

As they approached the corner, there was a loud thud. “Eh? What was—” Lili and Yona rounded the corner in time to watch Tetora be stabbed from behind, through the shouji.

Lili covered her mouth in horror as Tetora fell to the floor. “You’re…the Nadai smuggler? What if…you’d stabbed…your man…?” Tetora asked.

“Then I’d just get another drug puppet. Kill her and toss her in the ocean.” The Nadai smuggler ordered as he pulled out a hand mirror and fuss at his bangs, trying to hide a scar in the middle of his forehead.

“TETORA!!!” The scream Lili had been containing burst out.

Yona was too horrified by the sheer…darkness…of the smuggler to scream. *Kum-ji’s darkness would quiver next to his. He doesn’t care about the bodies ravaged by Nadai…about the lives destroyed…it feeds him!*

“Yona…take Lili-sama…and run…” Tetora got out, trying to stay calm, so her heart didn’t race and speed up the blood loss.

*I can’t. If I do…Tetora will be killed for sure. All I can do…is fight!* Shoving Lili behind her, Yona drew her sword, tossing the sheath to the side.

As she took a ready stance, she could feel him-her settling in her body, to move with her, just as he had in *Fire*, when they killed Kan Su-jin. *Let me do this!* The feeling of him-her receded. He was still hovering, but not acting through her or with her. *Thank you. I know I’m still weak, but please, let me see where I stand…* There was a reluctant acceptance, then she could feel him at her back. ‘*You’re not weak; you’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. Now, prove that to yourself.*’

One of the men who exited the room with the Nadai smuggler drew his own sword. Despite the solidity of her stance, the force of the man’s first strike sent her into the wall.

The smuggler didn’t bother looking up from his mirror. “I was wondering what you were planning on doing with that sword, but…”

“S-stop it! With just you—!” Lili’s words turned into a scream as Yona barely managed to parry the attacker.

“Why’s he playing with this girl?” Murmured among the smuggler’s men.

“Stay by me Lili.” Yona ordered.

“Cheeky bitch! Just give up! You’re barely keeping up!” The attacker sneered. “You’re only denying my victory!”

“I may be ‘barely’ keeping up, but I’m still keeping up. Besides, compared to the sword I’m used to facing, your blade is dull and slow.” Yona retorted.

Breathing deep, the fire, her fire, filled her, like in *Awa*, and she ducked a kick aimed at her midsection. Crouched down, she swung, and took his right leg off below the knee.

The smuggler clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Permit me, Hyou-sama.” The light haired man still near the smuggler, Hyou, said, drawing his own sword and darting forward.
She barely managed to get between Lili and their new attacker, let alone to start pushing her back, when the sword connected.

Shooting pain, from her right shoulder to her left hip, as she and Lili hit the floor.

Moving was painful, but not impossible, and she gritted her teeth and rose to her feet. She checked the others. The wolf, cat, and dark fire were still far away. She couldn’t tell if they felt the fighting, but there was no panic. Sun and moon raced closed, the ghostly feel of a nesting mother at their heels. Him-her was barely staying out of it, despite his rage and worry. Hiyou and his men seemed a little dumbfounded, like she was supposed to give up once her blood was spilled.

Like. Hell.

Yona could feel Lili’s dumbfounded stare on her back. “What are you doing?! Why are you protecting me, despite being outmatched? How are you so self-sacrificing?!”

“Self-sacrificing?” She repeated. “I’m fighting to survive. I refuse to bow down to any unjust power.”

Hiyou finally deigned to look up from his mirror, annoyed by this uppity girl. “She is annoying. Kill her now.”

The moon shot into this section of the hall, burning red with rage. “Shin-ah!” Yona exclaimed, letting her locked knees relax and sink down to the floor.

“Yona! You’re bleeding!” Yun exclaimed as he and Zeno ran up.

“This is the Nadai smuggler.” Yona said simply.

Later, she would be honestly surprised that Shin-ah didn’t paralyze the hearts of the smugglers, even through the mask. With quick efficiency he killed Hiyou’s henchmen. “Hold up, Shin-ah. I want to ask him.” Yona said, rising to her feet again.

Her question on her tongue, Yona noticed movement on Hiyou’s torso. Shin-ah was too focused on controlling the dark dragon that seethed under the mask, wanting to lash out at the man who had hurt its fire dragon girl to actively notice the movement. She didn’t wait to find out just what Hiyou was grabbing for.

Hiyou didn’t move fast enough to avoid her blade, her speed fueled by fire and rage not wholly her own. She cut across the scar already on his face, down to his lips. She missed cutting off his nose, or blinding him in one eye, but she still took grim satisfaction in her wound. “Don’t move.” She ordered.

“You’re the one who doesn’t need to be moving!” Yun countered, before Hiyou began freaking out.

“THERE’S ANOTHER CUT ON MY SKIN!!! I’LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU FOR THIS!! I WILL ABSOLUTELY KILL YOU!!” The crazed drug smuggler raged, darting away like a rat.

Shin-ah moved to follow him, intent on stopping him, only for Zeno to stop him. “Seiryuu! We need to help the girls!” Zeno half-yelled, half-ordered.

“Tetora…she was stabbed…” Yona got out, beginning to crash as her adrenaline decreased, Zeno pulling off his scarf to try and put pressure on the wound.

“The lad’s seeing to her. I sent the owner to get a doctor. Miss Lili,” She jumped violently from her
position between Tetora and Yona. “The rooms are near here, yes?”

“Down the hall…but is it safe to move them?” She asked, worried.

“Have to; all my supplies are there.” Yun declared. “Shin-ah, can you carry Tetora?”

Shin-ah reluctantly followed Yun’s order as Zeno coaxed Yona to her feet.

The short walk to their rooms felt like hours. At the door to the room where Lili was staying with Tetora and Ayura, Ayura was waiting, having been directed there after seeing the boys running past. Taking Tetora from Shin-ah, she led the way in for Lili and Yun, while he nearly teleported across the hall to Yona.

“Can you stand long enough for Zeno to get a fresh robe?” He asked as he went to get just that.

Shin-ah stood in front of Yona, who sagged gratefully against his chest. Between the three of them, they managed to get Yona changed and in a futon. Ao sat by Yona’s face, nuzzling and for once not offering nuts.

Eyes flicking to the door, Shin-ah pushed his mask up. “Zeno.”

“?’ Zeno made a questioning noise as he pulled back, his scarf soaked with blood.

Narrowing his eyes, Shin-ah looked, down to the level of all the tiny blood vessels. The dark dragon of his power perked up, looking with him. *Can we paralyze the blood vessels for a few hours?*

The dragon version of a shrug answered.

“Yona.” He whispered. “Can I try something to stop the bleeding?”

“Yes.”

With Yona’s consent, ghost images of the dark dragon raced along the edges of the wound, breathing fire. “OH! It numbed…” Yona exclaimed as Shin-ah pulled back, panting heavily. There was a line of numbness mirroring Yona’s wound across his back, but it worked. “It’s only for a couple hours, but I paralyzed the edges of the wound to stop the bleeding.” He explained as Yun bustled in, pulling his mask back down just in time.

“You have fine control over what’s paralyzed?!” Yun exclaimed as he took over Zeno’s task of cleaning the wound.

“I wasn’t sure it would work. It might only work on Yona or a dragon.” Shin-ah added, slowly getting his breathing under control.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, no clue if what I have Shin-ah doing is a medically accurate thing.
“Good news is you don’t need any stitches.” Yun told Yona, trying to avoid looking at the glimpses of her breasts he was getting. “It’s long, but not very deep, so it’s didn’t hit the spine. Bad news is that it’ll scar.”

“If that’s the only bad news, then it’s not really bad news.” She countered. “Tell me you’re almost done.”

“Zeno, lift her torso up so I can wrap the bandages.” Yun ordered.

I’ve dealt with female patients with torso and chest injuries before; I should not be bothered by having to touch Yona’s breasts to make sure the bandages stay on. It’s not like Raiju can kill me for it... Heavens above, please don’t tell me I’m starting to turn into one of those guys who only thinks about girls’ breasts…and other…stuff… Yun couldn’t completely suppress his blush, or the way these clinical touches felt like sparks.

The bandages done, Yona cautiously shifted to her side. “Breasts make it so much harder to be comfortable on my stomach.” She grumbled, and Yun gave up on trying to suppress his blush.

“The miss should go to sleep and rest.” Zeno ordered/suggested, hovering between Yona and Shin-ah, who wasn’t handling Yona’s injury very well, now that there was some kind of calm restored.

Zeno couldn’t help being reminded of that kidnapping attempt, and how everyone around her was more worried about it then she was.

“Once Hak’s here.” She said firmly.

Or tried to, but ended up yawning at the end. “Shin-ah.” She said, a quiet command in his name.

Pulling off his mask and fluff, he shuffled closer, until he was curled up in a ball against her. With his head in easy reach, she buried her fingers in his hair, playing with it. “I’m alive. Yun has tended to my wound, and what you and your power did helped to stop the bleeding. It was either get between Lili and the blade, or let her get hurt, likely seriously. NONE of us had any inkling that Shisen’s drug lord would be here at the same time. I made the choice to shield Lili with my body. This is not any kind of failure by any of you, in any way.” She said firmly, managing to keep her yawns at bay until she finished.

Continuing to play with Shin-ah’s hair, Yona let her eyes fall shut.

There was the sound of crying. Looking around, Yona saw the source: four dragons, the size of hatchlings.

Her dragons.

While the wolf, moon, cat, and sun were how she saw them as individuals, this was their power. The white dragon was hitting itself with its tail, green looked sullen, blue was crying, and yellow...

There was a nudge, and turning her head, she saw yellow, nuzzling her back. “None of you are at
fault for my injury.” She stroked their heads gently with a soft smile. “I chose to protect Lili, I chose to fight. I just…wasn’t strong enough to not be injured.”

Her head rested on a lap, a hand carefully rubbing her back. The perfume was nostalgic. “Mother.”

“You’ve gotten so big. I can’t call you ‘little dove’ anymore. Or ‘little dragon.’”

“You remember…?”

“Once I entered Heaven, I remembered.”

A new scent mingled with the perfume, as one of her hands was picked up. “Father.”

It took all her willpower to not jerk her hand back, away from the examination her new calluses were getting. “I’m sorry. I…”

“You owe me no apology. The apology owed is mine. For not telling you I knew, and smothering the fire.”

“I didn’t tell you, either. And it didn’t light until That Night.”

“Still, perhaps the lessons learned would have been less painful, if I hadn’t smothered and disregarded your potential.” A hand ran through her hair. “Does he make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“As long as he does, he has my blessing.”

A knot she wasn’t aware of in her chest eased. “I could tell, that day when you two met.”

The urge to open her eyes, to see them, both of them, again, became too much, and—

--she was greeted with the sight of Hak dozing against the wall. The scents still lingered, and she smiled, even as a tear fell.

Closing her eyes, she drifted back to sleep.

Yona floated back awake sometime later, and Hak was sitting next to her futon. “I wanted to be awake when you got back.” She whispered.

“How are you doing? Should I get Yun?” He asked, shifting as to be kneeling facing to her futon.

“I’m good. Where’s everyone else?” She asked.

“Yun’s checking up on Tetora. The others went looking for Hiyou.” Hak told her, pulling the water pitcher and cups closer. “He was behind the operation at Suirei. And not just Suirei, the whole town’s black market operation too.”

“I doubt he’s still here. He was so dark…it’s like he’s a vampire, feeding off the effect of the Nadai. He’s scurried back to his pit.” She said, shifting. “How’s Tetora doing?”

“Yun’s not gonna let her die.” Before she realized it, he was cradling her in his arm upright, barely putting pressure on her wound. “You shouldn’t be moving.” He chided, putting his jacket around her.
“I can’t drink water on my stomach.” She pointed out.

Rolling his eyes, he held a cup to her lips to drink. “...they came to me, while I was sleeping.” She said quietly, between sips.

“’They’?”

“Mother and Father.”

He went rigid. “The… the Queen and…”

A finger rested on his lips. “Father… he said that as long as you make me happy, you have his blessing.”

It was a good thing Hak had already set the cup down, or Yona would have wound up with a lapful of water. “I didn’t realize how much I wanted to hear that, until I heard it.” She admitted. “We’re long past needing approval but…”

“He’s still your Father, and my King. The question of his blessing would always hang in the back of our minds.” He reminded her.

She cupped his face, despite the ache it caused. “All of you need to stop beating yourselves up, about my injury. It’s my responsibility; I chose to fight. None of you failed.” She told him sternly.

He pulled her into his lap, tucking her head under his chin. “Don’t be crazy; you’re too important, not only to me, but to the monkeys generation two. Every tear, every drop of blood spilled… will be our responsibility.”

“Hime-sama, we’re back.” Kija greeted Yona as he slid the door open.

“Welcome back.” Yona returned the greeting over her shoulder, her back to the door as Yun checked over her wound.

Kija immediately turned bright red as Jaeha joined him in the doorway. “Yona-chan, can we come in?”

“O-of course we can’t!!” Kija sputtered in protest, even as he followed Jaeha into the room.

“What did you find out?” Yona asked over the brief argument over who got to put her bandages back on.

“That guy, Hyou, owns multiple stores, both here and in Sensui. It looks like his base of operations is in Sensui.”

Hak crouched in front of Yona to avoid having to see her first wound, hiding his mouth in a rice cracker to disguise his frown.

As if teaching her bows and swords and callusing her hands wasn’t bad enough…

“It’s healing cleanly.” Yun remarked. “We should detour to Awa after this, if we can. This is the last of the salve I made with senju herb.”

“Doesn’t Tetora need it more?” Yona asked, worried.

“When I say the last, I mean the last. Most of what I had left I used on her wound.” Yun assured her.
“This is practically wiping the jar clean.”

“As long as Hime-sama doesn’t have to go for it this time.” Kija declared, doing his level best to not stare at Yona’s breasts, despite the shielding blanket.

(He utterly failed.)

“Once we take care of Hiyou.” Yona promised. “Southern Kai is where Nadai has been coming from, and if the drug problem has come to Su-won’s attention, he’s likely to strike there. It’s also the main destination for the people Kum-ji sold over the years.” She added.

“I would how everyone’s doing?” Jaeha wondered out loud. “And who took over with Kum-ji dead.”

Somehow, Kija was able to turn away as the shielding blanket dropped and the bandages adjusted. Hak glared Jaeha into turning away. “What kind of place is Sensui?” Yona asked, pulling her robe back on.

“Another harbor town, like Shisen. It used to be famed as a sight-seeing destination, before…” Jaeha trailed off in a shrug as Shin-ah entered the room, Lili at his side.

“Lili!” Yona exclaimed, Yun tying her sash back.

“How is your wound?” Lili asked, shaking her head to dispel the lingering image from her nightmare, of Yona being sliced to bits.

“It’s no big deal. How’s Tetora?” Yona brushed off her comparatively minor injury.

The look on Lili’s face said she very much disagreed with that assertion. “She’s out of danger, thanks to that miracle salve of Yun’s. She still has to stay in bed for now.” Lili replied.

“That’s good. I was worried, after hearing where she was stabbed. Are you going to be staying here until she’s cleared to move?” Yona asked, untangling Ao from the leftover bandages.

“About that, I’m planning on taking Tetora to Suiko, so—right, my house is in Suiko, and she’ll be able to rest there. Father might just send out the cavalry if I’m not home before long.” Lili informed them as she kneeled next to Yona’s futon. “After what happened, the owner will let you stay for free for as long as you need to.”

Taking in Lili’s downcast face, and everything she suspected, Yona went out on a limb.

“It’s too bad your father is nearly as overprotective as mine was, An Lili.”

Lili froze when Yona said this. She had never given her family name.

“If he had brought you to the castle the way Mundok did with Hak, we could have been friends years ago.” Yona imagined with a slight smile.

Lili wasn’t the only one dumbfounded at Yona’s statement, Yun muttering every clue that he had missed about who Lili was.

“How did you know?” Lili managed to get out.

“To be honest, I wasn’t completely sure until right now. But I knew General An Jun-gi has a
daughter, and with how you’d been spying on us…you thought we were drug smugglers?” Lili, after a long moment, nodded. “Mostly though, it was a gut feeling.” Yona admitted.

“Then…” Lili stared at the bright, crimson hair.

*It’s been staring me in the face this whole time, hasn’t it… “…it’s not a nickname, is it?”* Lili whispered, as Jaeha pulled out a list where he had taken to tallying up who figured out who Yona really was.

Not that she was exactly making it hard.

“No.” Somehow, Yona’s eyes seemed ancient.

“But why then—“ Lili snapped her mouth shut, conscious of how, for all its luxury, this was still a public inn.

“I saw Father’s murder…and his murderer. As I was not meant to have witnessed that…Hak’s the reason I was able to escape.” Yona answered quietly, fingerling the blanket. “As for why I’m here, I can’t just stand idly by and do nothing. Even if it would be safer, I can’t look away from the suffering of the people. If Nadai isn’t stopped in Water, its only a matter of time before the rest of the kingdom is poisoned by it.” The hard look in her eyes stole Lili’s breath away.

For a moment, there was another face over hers’. A man’s face, with the same hard look in his eyes, with crimson hair and wearing armor. “It’s real.” Lili breathed, eyeing Kija’s strange right hand and Jaeha’s unusual hair color. The way they hovered around Yona, with Shin-ah and Zeno. “The myth…”

“Even without the myth, I would be doing this. I let Father coddle me, playing the innocent, spoiled daughter he wanted me to be. I knew some of what was happening in the kingdom, but knowledge does not equal actual experience. The myth just means I have a way to peaceably get back what’s mine.” Yona told Lili, centuries disappearing from her eyes until she was just a sixteen year old girl again. “Suiko is definitely a safer place for Tetora to recover than here.”

“Uh, speaking of Suiko…” Yun cautiously entered the conversation. “What IS your father, the Water General, doing?”

“He’s a calm and cautious man. With Nadai coming from the Kai Empire, you need to be. That said, I don’t know what he’s been doing to combat the Nadai epidemic.” Hak said, crossing his arms.

“Still, with the way things are in his Tribe…” Kija pointed out, Lili staring blankly at Yona’s blankets.

Noticing Lili’s downturn in mood, Yona didn’t list off how her father could have acted without offending Kai. “Lili, we’ll be going onto Sensui after this.”

“Sensui?” Lili repeated with a blink.

Yona nodded. “It appears that Hiyou’s main base of operation is there.”

“The reports on public safety in Sensui have been getting worse and worse. Most people can’t do any business there anymore.” Lili remarked.

“It’s probably worse off than Shisen, if that’s Hiyou’s base. From what I learned before, Hiyou and his operation is one of the largest Koukan-based operations dealing in Nadai. Stopping him will go a long way to stopping Nadai from spreading. Putting money into clinics for addicts will help as well.”
Yona turned to Lili with a smile. “Will you see to the clinics, while we stop Hiyou? If people are being exposed to Nadai through tainted wine, that would bring it under the purview of the Wine Control Offices. The Control Offices are meant to ensure quality control and to keep people from passing off lower-grade wine as higher-grade, but it also covers any and all illegal additives. True, it has no jurisdiction on the docks, but it can root out Nadai away from the coast.”

Lili nodded, trying to swallow back tears. “How…how can you be so calm? Rushing off into danger again…’I want to save the Water Tribe’…I said it so carelessly, but I can’t do anything, not like you- -!” Yona pulled Lili down into her lap, rubbing her head.

“As the daughter of the General, you have authority only second to his. You can authorize mass numbers of clinics, and finance them. Power…it comes in different forms, not just strength of arms. Suiko Castle is Your domain just as much as it is his, and what can be done from there, I can’t do. Saving the Water Tribe…the efforts must come from the ground up and the top down. And right now, only you can do the top down efforts.” Yona told her as she pulled back, wiping at her tears.

“…when are you leaving for Sensui?” Lili asked.

“You are not leaving that bed for more than the chamber pot until tomorrow. And Tetora should not be moved until tomorrow either.” Yun ordered sternly before Yona could reply.

“Tomorrow, then.” Yona told Lili with a sheepish smile. “That said, why don’t we have the sweets we didn’t get to have the other night?”

Su-won wasn’t sure what all the fuss about his new cousin’s hair was all about. Father had been really mad about it for some reason, so Mother was the one to bring him to meet his cousin.

Aunt Cheonsa—she wasn’t Okisaki-sama yet—held a finger to her lips as he crawled across the bed towards her and the bundle of blankets she held. “Stay quiet; Yona’s sleeping.” She whispered as he peeked inside the blankets.

Red was his initial reaction. Brilliant red hair, brighter than the red dragons all over the castle, and pink cheeks. She was tiny, like one of the china dolls Mother kept carefully high up out of his reach. If it wasn’t for her breathing, he would have taken her for a baby doll.

The movement increased as much as the blanket she was wrapped in allowed, until, with a furrowed brow, her eyes opened.

They were like Aunt Cheonsa’s in color. For an instant, he thought he saw fire in Yona’s eyes, but then it was gone. She started making noises, and Aunt Cheonsa asked, “Do you want to hold her?”

He nodded fiercely. “Sit flat on your bottom.” Mother said, and Aunt Cheonsa placed Yona in his lap once he had done that.

She was moving more, enough to loosen the blanket to where she could stick an arm out. He cupped her tiny fist in his palm, and she in turn grabbed a finger and held on tight.

“I think she likes you. She cried so hard when Brother-in-law held her.” The last part was directed to Mother.

Then he was with Father and Grandfather and Uncle and Aunt, with an ‘oracle’, in the shrine room under the throne room. Yona was dressed in bright red robes and laid on the altar. He was more than a little jealous; SHE got to stay asleep, while he had to stay standing in his itchy formal robes. Thankfully, Father didn’t see his sulky pout, or he’d have gotten his bottom smacked.
The ‘oracle’, having done some weird twirl-y dance with stinky incense, stood behind the altar. Bringing his hands together, he raised his head to the ceiling.

**Darkness falls upon the great earth**

**Through the blood of dragons, a revival comes again**

**Bound by the covenant of old**

**When the Four Dragons assemble**

**The sword and shield that protect the sovereign shall awaken**

**And the red dragon shall return at dawn**

That made Father really, really mad, and he and Grandfather started shouting at each other. Ignored by the adults, he was able to climb onto the altar, where Yona was. She opened her eyes, and again there was fire, surging out.

Su-won started awake, blinking at the camp they had set up for the night. Was Father angry back then, because he knew who Yona had been? I know he didn’t like the power the birth myth gave the priests, but could that have extended to Yona? The details were fading rapidly, but the fiery, encompassing anger Father showed at the end, after the ‘oracle’ spoke…

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he shifted position, and closed his eyes. *Stay on task Su-won; I need to see for myself just how bad the Nadai problem is in Water.*

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit, sixty chapters! Definitely not what I had planned when I set out writing this, not that I had that much of a plan. That’s what I get for letting the characters lead me instead of me leading them.

Not completely happy with this chapter and the last one, mostly because like the Tae-Jun ones, the focus is off of our Happy Hungry Bunch. But since I have Lili able to see ghosts, I figured its not much of an ass-pull to have her ‘see’ Hiryuu.

At long last, Yona’s mother has a canon name. But I’m rather attached to my fan-name for her, so I’ll work her canon name in instead of going back and changing everything. Thus she is Cheonsa of the Kashi clan, Kashi Cheonsa.
“This is surreal.” Lili admitted, absently eating a sweet rice cracker. “I mean, just sitting here calmly eating sweets…!”

“It’s not like we got to enjoy them the other night.” Yona pointed out.

“Still…that was meant for the sacred space of femininity.” Lili countered as she watched Yona’s dragons fight over the sweets with a sweat drop.

“Guys, could you let me and Lili talk privately for a bit?” Yona asked.

“As long as you continue to rest.” Yun agreed, leaving to check up on Tetora.

“You wanted to enjoy the hot springs, right Jaeha?” Yona prodded.

“Hmm…I suppose I should, if we’re leaving tomorrow and you want girl time.” Jaeha caved to her eager eyes, grabbing Kija and Shin-ah as he departed. Shin-ah slumped in compliance while Kija sputtered protests impotently.

That left Zeno and Hak. “Zeno will join his brothers in the hot springs.” He skipped after the others.

That left Hak and Yona staring at each other in a silent contest of wills. Hak conceded with a sigh. “Do I have to leave the room?” He asked in a near-whine.

“You can stay in the corner if you don’t pay attention.” Yona conceded, grabbing his hand and pressing a kiss on his knuckles.

Leaning in, Hak grabbed a brief yet deep kiss before he left the girls ‘alone’. “Are you alright?” Yona asked.

“I should be asking that! I’m not the one who got cut open!” Lili protested.

“I’m not the one whose world has been shaken up.” Yona reminded her. “I doubt you expected any of this, when you set out to save the Water Tribe. I know I didn’t quite realize the scope of the problem until I saw the effects of Nadai myself.”

“I know Father doesn’t want to enter into battle with Southern Kai, but he hasn’t done anything to help the addicts either!” Lili quietly exclaimed. “Sure, a clinic here or some money there, but no major action.”

“True, they are addicted to a substance, but the initial encounter is not of their choosing. That makes the Nadai addiction a mass poisoning. But directing the Wine Control Offices to move against shops selling tainted wine will be a good start. I need to see there’s a way to test for Nadai, without someone having to drink it.” Yona said. “They like to burn it in the incense too, and that could be under import control… I think. I researched every law and decree that could be used to fight Nadai, but that notebook is back at the castle.”

“You…said you saw his murderer?” Lili tentatively broached, changing the subject. “And his…”

Yona nodded, tears in her eyes. “I had wanted to think I was hallucinating something from him-me’s,
Hiryuu’s memories, but then Father’s body hit the floor in front of me and…”

“‘Him-me’? Why do you call him that?”

“When I was little, I didn’t understand how we related to each other, about reincarnation, but I knew that I was him, and he was me, so…” Yona shrugged. “When he decided to be reborn, he had intended a clean slate, but instead, I’ve always remembered. Both of us are human, but our soul is still that of an Elder Dragon God. That’s probably why things didn’t go as he planned. There had been a bit of a disconnect, seeing my face in the mirror, until the fire of the Crimson Dragon God lit, That Night, and I affirmed ‘myself’.” She elaborated. “But…he lost his adoptive parents the same way I lost mine.”

“Woah…” Lili breathed out. “So why did he descend anyway? That’s the one thing I hate about the birth myth, it doesn’t say why a Dragon God would just decide to become human.”

“Mostly curiosity. He spent so much time watching humans, and eventually he wanted to experience life as a human. He could have taken a human form temporarily, but that didn’t appeal to him. He wanted the whole experience, so…he became a human infant.” Yona explained. “Needless to say, it turned out a lot different than he expected.” This last sentence was said with a smile.

“A good different, I hope.” Lili remarked.

“For the most part. Falling in love was the biggest unexpected event.” Yona admitted, biting back a giggle.

“Well aren’t I special.” Hak drawled from his corner.

“Wait, Hak’s the reincarnation of Hiryuu-ou’s lover?!” Lili exclaimed.

“Ha-kun, Hiryuu’s wife and Queen.” Yona confirmed.

Lili wasn’t sure how to react, as squealing didn’t feel appropriate. Or is it? I mean, it seems to me that Hiryuu-ou was reborn now so he could be with his lover…Lili lost her fight, and quietly squealed, making Yona giggle and Hak sigh. “I’m going to go bug Droopy Eyes…” He muttered, making his retreat.

“Does he remember?!” Lili demanded.

“He’s remembered some things, but he guessed who ‘Ha-kun’ was on his own, since I’d slip up and call him ‘Ha-kun’ at times, like if he woke me up. But…” Yona sent Lili a sly look. “I’m pretty sure he remembers all the particulars about satisfying a woman subconsciously, since he has been exceptional in that area. And like I said, brothels aren’t his scene.”

Lili flushed. “…and you?”

“Hak has definitely not been complaining about my efforts.” Yona said with a smirk. “Beyond that…most of what I remember relate to people important to him.”

“People important to him?” Lili repeated with a blink.

“Like his Dragon Warriors, Ha-kun, his parents, his children…I remember how he met each one, before they became Dragon Warriors, but I don’t remember how he united the provinces into Kouka. Unfortunately, I can also remember the person who can ultimately be regarded as the cause for the Dragon Warriors’ creation, since he had been trusted kin.” Yona said.
“The cause?” Lili asked.

“A cousin of his father, who had expected to inherit the original Kouka, since Hiryuu’s adoptive parents were childless before he descended. He played nice for some years, but that changed.” Yona revealed sadly. “That cousin’s son was the one who killed Hiryuu’s adoptive father. The cousin was the one about to kill him when the Dragon Gods descended.” Yona explained.

Conversation lapsed as more sweets disappeared and Lili thought about other questions she might have. “I can’t ask anything more about the late King’s murder, I don’t feel comfortable asking more about Hiryuu-ou, and I can’t ask anything about sex when any of the guys could come back in at any time… Lili noticed Yona shifting with a slight grimace. “Are you okay? Should I get Yun or Hak?” She asked.

Yona shook her head. “No…it’s getting a little uncomfortable to be sitting up. Do you think you can help me lay back down?” She requested with an apologetic look.

Somehow, Lili was able to help Yona lay back down on her side. “Thank you.” Yona said through a yawn. “I think Yun might have slipped something in my tea to make me sleep.”

“Does he usually do that?”

Yona nodded through another yawn. “You don’t have to stay; I’ll be fine.”

“Are you kidding? Your guys will kill me if I leave and something happens! Again!” Lili protested.

Whatever Yona was trying to say was lost in a yawn, and soon Lili was watching Yona sleep.

Now that she was asleep, Lili could see the tension leave her face. “She looks like every other girl… so why does she seem like a torch, drawing everyone to her light?” Lili whispered. “Is it because of who she was?”

“I don’t think so.” Yun said as he entered the room. “Maybe it’s me and my natural inclination to discount mystical stuff, but I’m pretty sure she’d be like this even if she wasn’t his reincarnation.”

“She going to become a legend, isn’t she?” Lili reflected as she stood. “I just hope she won’t get hurt again while her legend grows.”

Yun nodded in agreement.

“Yun’s with Yona now.” Shin-ah reported as Hak joined the others in the hot spring.

“Why didn’t we feel anything when she was hurt?” Kija wondered. “I don’t recall feeling anything that would have indicated she was hurt…”

“I know we had been distracted at the teahouse, but shouldn’t we have still felt something?” Jaeha agreed.

“Zeno and Seiryuu didn’t notice anything either. It wasn’t until Seiryuu spotted the fight when he was checking on the Miss’s location that we knew there was trouble.” Zeno remarked, Shin-ah nodding in agreement.

“…she said that none of us should take responsibility for her injury; that since it was her choice to fight.” Hak told the others. “But I think she knows we’ll still feel responsible no matter what she says,”
“Of course we will! She’s our master!” Kija said vigorously.

“So what’s the plan for dealing with this drug lord, Hiyou?” Jaeha asked. “Beyond the obvious of making him pay back every drop of Yona-chan’s blood with one of his own.”

“We need to see what the situation is in Sensui before we can really make any plans. But Hime-san will definitely be a target. I doubt he’s happy about having a deal interrupted.” Hak replied.

“He flew into a rage, after Yona cut his face.” Shin-ah informed Kija, Hak, and Jaeha. “The way he reacted, it was like it had been a major injury, not just a cut.”

“A-rin did say Hiyou is always fussing at his bangs, trying to hide his existing scar…” Jaeha considered. “Once we’re a fair distance from Shisen, I’ll take Yona-chan on ahead to Sensui. If we hide her hair more, and if Yun agrees to dress in Yona-chan’s spare clothes and cloak… I don’t know how well it would work, but it wouldn’t hurt to try for some misdirection.”

“Yeah, Yun’s the only one short enough to dress up as Hime-san. Any other planning has to wait until we take stock of things in Sensui.” Hak agreed to Jaeha’s plan.

“Let me at least carry my bow and quiver; it doesn’t weight as much.” Yona said, trying to at least carry something, as they prepared to depart the next morning.

“I’d prefer staying a couple more days so your wound can heal more before we leave. Lili did say the owner would let us stay for free as long as we need to.” Yun protested.

“But we’ve been traveling with the others wounded worse than this.” Yona pointed out.

“YOU’RE HUMAN; THEY’RE DEMONS!!!” Yun roared. “NOT THE SAME THING!”

“They’re referring to you Hak.” Kija said, ignoring how injured he was after the battle with Sen Province troops.

“No way; they mean you White Snake.” Hak countered, ignoring his heavy injuries from the fight in the cliffs near Ik-su’s place.

“The miss and the lad mean everyone!” Zeno exclaimed.

“Yona!” Yona turned to look at Lili as she ran over.

“You’re really leaving today?” Lili asked once she had joined them.

“You’re really leaving today?” Lili asked once she had joined them.

“Yeah.” Yona confirmed with a nod.

Lili suddenly shoved a food bundle in Yona’s arms. “Here! The Water Tribe’s famous honeydew buns!” In the background, Zeno cheered and Yun took possession of the buns as Lili continued. “I know things have been terrible here in Water, but… we can still lay claim to beautiful sights and delicious foods.”

“You forgot nice hot springs.” Yona added. “It was really fun too.”

“Really?” Lili looked down with a faint blush, and noticed Yona’s crooked bow in her sash ribbon. “Your bow’s sticking straight up, you know.”

“That?” Yona looked down at the bow herself. “My arms got tired, so I didn’t bother fixing it. It’s fine.”
“I guess that can’t be helped. I’ll tie it for you.” Lili said as she untied the sash ribbon…

…only for her bow to look much like Yona’s bow. “Huh? Why’s it straight up?” Lili wondered.

“I thought you pull up from the bottom?” Yona asked, watching Lili untie the bow and try again.
“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” She asked as the second try ended up looking like the first.

“Of course I do!” Lili answered hotly. “I always watch Tetora tie mine! You can learn by watching others!”

“Uh, I don’t think watching someone do it on you is the same as doing it on someone else…” Yona trailed off as Lili created a third straight up bow.

Yona couldn’t help it, and started laughing. “WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING?” Lili complained, undoing her third try and quickly tying a bow that was even for the most part.

“You’re funny!” Yona complimented as her laughter trailed off. “Well, time to go.”

She really is leaving… “Take care!” Lili called to Yona’s back as she joined the others. “THANK YOU!” I’ll do my best too, to save my Tribe…

“There’s another reason to leave.” Yona quietly admitted after they departed and passed the city walls. “We can’t discount Hiyou sending men to kill me. The sooner he’s gone, the safer everyone will be.”

“We have a plan!” Jaeha proudly announced.

“Huh?” Yona blinked as Yun ducked into the bushes with what looked like some of her spare clothes.

“Yun’s gonna dress in your spare clothes. Droopy Eyes will go ahead to Sensui with you, while we walk with Yun in disguise.” Hak informed her as Zeno managed the tricky task of covering her hair more thoroughly with his scarf without pulling her hood down. “We have no clue how well this will work, but it doesn’t hurt to try.”

“Okay…” Yona consented as Yun returned, Jaeha crouching down so she could get on his back.

Hak watched Jaeha and Yona disappear into the distance, taking up a position by Yun that matched where he’d normally be in relation to Yona as they walked.

“Are you alright, Jaeha?” Yona asked once they reached an abandoned hut on the edge of Sensui, the roof intact enough to keep the inside dry. “I know you don’t like killing…” She trailed off, remembering the gauntlet of drug puppets they had run.

“They’re drug puppets, right? Nadai addicts that Hiyou uses?” At Yona’s nod he continued. “As addicts, anything I could have done that would usually be enough to stop them wouldn’t work. Captain Gi-gan didn’t want any of her crew with the sin of murder, but, to keep you safe…” He shrugged.

She grabbed his hand, tugging lightly. Taking the hint, he sat down next to her, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her towards his body heat. “Hiyou went crazy, after I cut him. He likely wants me dead nearly as much as I want him dead.” She said, leaning her head on his chest.
“An inn will have to wait for the others to catch up. I’d prefer strength of numbers if we stay somewhere public.” He wrapped the overcoat he had brought with him around her, feeling her shivering despite her best efforts.

“I’m sorry, that you had to do something you hate, because of me.” This statement made him jerk. The pair fell silent, as Jaeha wasn’t sure how to response. It’s strange, how it’s easier to tell what’s my feelings and what’s from the dragon’s blood since I saw Hiryuu-ou in that dream. Maybe because he told me what the dragon’s blood would make me feel, and what it wouldn’t. “So do you know who might have been picked to take over Awa?” He asked.

“Hmmm…if I was picking, I’d pick Captain Gi-Gan. I don’t think anyone who would eligible to take over Awa would be able to deal with her influence.” She replied.

“…what is he like?” Jaeha cautiously asked, with unspoken implication of which ‘he’ he was referring to. I know Hak is full of sorrowful rage towards ‘Su-won’, and she wanted to marry him…

“…smart. He acts like an airhead, but he’s not as big a one as he appears. Almost as good a fighter as Hak.” She finally answered.

“That doesn’t seem possible.” He remarked.

“Su-won and Hak were a great fighting pair. I…” She trailed off. “I don’t know when I started wanting to keep Su-won with me forever like Hak. My crush started when I was six, when he’d hold my hand as I went to sleep after Mother was killed, but at some point…it became more than a crush. As much as what happened hurt me, I think it hurt Hak just as bad, if not worse.”

“Since they were friends?”

“Hak was--is--loyal to Father, and like I said before, both of us thought Su-won and I would marry, become King and Queen, and Hak would spend his life keeping us and Kouka safe. He’d make sure Su-won got out of battle safely, and I’d fuss over every scratch they’d get. Su-won betrayed all of that, for revenge for his father, Uncle Yuohon.” She explained.

He winced. “So the first time Hak sees him again there will be bloodshed.”

“Yup.” She shifted, so she was nearly in his lap. “Is this too touchy-feely?” She asked.

“You’re cold; cuddling with me for warmth is not something Hak can kill me over.” He said dryly.

“I’m serious Jaeha.” Yona said.

“So am I. Although you’re free to cuddle with me anytime.” Jaeha double-checked that the overcoat was fully tucked in around Yona.

She rolled her eyes, the hint of a blush on her cheeks. “You just want a cute girl in your lap.” She accused.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

The others caught up several hours later. “I see you cleared out the gauntlet for us.” Hak said in lieu of a greeting as he entered the hut.

Yun bustled into a corner half-hidden by a wall to change. “How do you handle the breeziness? It’s still technically summer, but that wind is cold!” He complained as he re-emerged, changing in record
“I’m just used to it. But at the castle my skirts are floor-length, so the wind can’t blow up the skirts as easily.” Yona admitted, handing Zeno back his scarf.

“…your face is still pale.” Shin-ah noted, hitting Jaeha in the face with his fluff as he put it around her shoulders.

“I had to use the privy, so I got cold again.” She explained as Hak sat down next to her and pulled her into his lap.

“I suppose those drug puppets are why you’re here and not at an inn?” Kija asked, digging a hole for the fire.

“I’d prefer strength of numbers if we were going to stay at an inn.” Jaeha said. “Did you encounter any trouble?”

Kija shook his head. “The only thing was that we had to save a girl who was being harassed by drug puppets. She said that they had mentioned looking for a woman with red hair, and they were planning on kidnapping her despite having brown hair.” The fire pit dug, there was quickly a decent-sized fire.

“That’s not good; we need to stop Hiyou before too many more people get caught up in this.” Yona said with a frown.

“Don’t tell me that you want to go looking for Hiyou…” Yun complained, reaching for his bandages.

“He’s looking for me, so why not give him what he wants and let him know the red-haired woman is looking for him as well?” Yona questioned, beginning the process of untangling herself from her layers and Hak’s hold enough for Yun to check her back. “Will you lend me your strength to stop this evil?” She asked her dragons.

“Our strength will always be yours to command.” Kija affirmed, answering for everyone.

“As long as the Miss doesn’t have any more buildings burned down.” Zeno added as a caveat.

“I have no idea what you are talking about Zeno.” Yona protested, her face full of innocence that none of them were buying.

Chapter End Notes

I had pictured Yona and Jaeha taking refuge in a teahouse headed by one of Mistress Sayuri’s former girls, but they insisted on the hut.

So I went to Otakon in DC so I could go to the Distant Worlds: Music From Final Fantasy concert Friday night...and just missed getting in. They ended the line just after I got there, and I was in the last group of 15-20 people praying for a chance. Already frustrated-cried yesterday, since I was very hot and very sweaty and very eager to see it, but now just annoyed at myself for not going over sooner. But I got the complete Cardcaptor Sakura anime and the Tenchi Muyo! OVAs on DVD, and the rest of YuuYuu Hakushou on DVD too so not a complete bust. Just wish I had found an Ao
plushie... Now to watch for a Philly concert...
Su-won almost couldn’t believe his luck, running into General Jun-gi’s daughter within hours of arriving in Sensui. *She’s bound to know about the problems Water’s been having*… He thought as he talked his way into getting himself, Ju-do, Mu-ah, and Gyoku hired as her bodyguards.

“Unfortunately I don’t have a lot of information myself.” Lady Lili said, once she consented to his suggestion.

“Whatever information you do have have in fine.” ‘Won’ assured her, Ju-do leaning in to complain. “I thought we were just going to scout? We can’t be bodyguards for long.”

“We can’t leave General Jun-gi’s daughter by herself. Plus this way, we can kill two birds with one stone.” He turned to Lady Lili. “So what is the current state of Sensui and Water?”

“Have you heard of the rumors about drugs in Water?” She asked as they started walking.

“A little bit.”

“They’re true. It’s a new drug from Southern Kai called Nadai. It starts pleasurable, but then immense pain replaces it. The addicts are crazy tough, since they can’t feel their injuries. The clinics can’t keep up. In Shisen, it costs twenty five thousand rin for one night’s stay.” She lectured.

The sounds of a fight caught Su-won’s attention. “Mm? It sounds like there’s a commotion over there.” He remarked, pointing at a nearby alley.

“It’s probably just addicts fighting. They need help, but first we need to take care of the person responsible for bringing Nadai into Kouka.” Lady Lili brushed the commotion off. “You’re my bodyguards; what I say goes!”

With one last frown, he turned away from the alley and followed her to a nearby restaurant. “The person who brought Nadai to Water is called Hiyou. He’s a foul man who stabbed one of my aides.” She explained around a dumpling. “I don’t know where he is or his plans, but I had heard that his business with the South Kai merchants is based here in Sensui.”

“Is this really the time to be stopping in a restaurant?” Ju-do asked flatly, a vein starting to pulse in his cheek.

“I rode all day on horseback to get here; I’m hungry!” Lady Lili exclaimed, already on her third bun.

“Sweets will give us energy; how about you try a dumpling?” Su-won offered, savoring the taste of his red-bean soup.

“I DON’T NEED ONE!!!”

“You hired a very short-tempered person.” Lady Lili noted.

“That’s what makes him so interesting!” He remarked with a smile. “But now that I’ve seen Sensui, I’ve realized that this is the first place I’ve seen where the people have such hard eyes.”

“Nadai destroys the body and mind, and changes the personality as well. I’ve talked to Father about
this countless times, but he refuses to listen to me. I know he doesn’t want to offend Southern Kai, but he hasn’t been doing anything to help the addicts either. Though I suppose I should call them victims.” She conceded at the end.

“How come?” Ju-do asked, doing his best to remain calm after his outburst.

“How come?” Ju-do asked, doing his best to remain calm after his outburst.

“From what I’ve learned, many of the addicts first encounter it in teahouses, where Nadai is mixed into the wine, and burned in the incense. By the time they realize it’s not just wine, it’s too late.” Lili explained. “Father…he doesn’t explain his reasons to me, just giving me the usual spiel about remaining calm and not rushing. It’s…it’s almost like he’s ignoring the whole matter, with how he hasn’t been helping the addicts to my knowledge. So I’m not going to try asking him anymore. I’m here in Sensui because I can’t just stand by while this beautiful land is sullied by another country any longer.”

“All alone?” Su-won asked.

“All alone?” Su-won asked.

“…is this where you tell me how reckless this is?” She asked instead of answering.

Su-won nodded. “I think General Jun-gi has found himself in several complicated positions, where there is possibly no ‘right’ answer. But, I don’t think someone who is trying their hardest to find a way out of the current situation is foolish or reckless. As long as you’re thinking about the Water Tribe, you should do everything you can without hesitating.”

Lili found that there was something in her eyes as Su-won added, “Of course, I’m sure General Jun-gi is only thinking of the Water Tribe as well…”

Lili was quiet before she said, “You say some pretty blunt things, despite how you look.”

“Huh?” Su-won questioned with a blink.

“You’ve been acting like an airhead, so I was sure you were really an airhead inside too.” She said as she rubbed her eyes.

“How mean…” Su-won complained, Ju-do nodding in agreement with Lili’s statement.

“But you have given me courage.” She admitted. “Thank you.”

“But you have given me courage.” She admitted. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Su-won returned to his red bean soup, Lili polishing off a few more dumplings as he finished.

Watching ‘Won’ out of the corner of her eye, Lili couldn’t help noting that something about him reminded her of Yona. He’s a lot like she is; kind of flaky-looking and weird on the outside, but really wise on the inside…” So,” She declared as she stood. “We need to find out where Hiyou is located and the details of his transactions.” Speaking of Yona… “I guess we should join up with that girl.”

“That girl?” Su-won asked as they left the restaurant.

“That girl?” Su-won asked as they left the restaurant.

“There’s this group that’s also fighting against the drug-smuggling operation. Even though they’re traveling entertainers, and aren’t from Water.” I’m pretty sure the ‘entertainers’ part is true to some degree, given how good Yona’s dancing was.

“That sounds interesting.” Su-won remarked.

“That sounds interesting.” Su-won remarked.

“They may have already gotten here. They did leave for Sensui before me, and didn’t have to go to
Suiko first. They might have found out something about Hiyou.” Lili explained.

“What are they like?” Su-won asked.

“They’re pretty weird, almost inhuman. To be honest, you have to see them to understand. The girl I’m talking about is their dancer, and around my age.” Lili replied.

“Really? I hope we do find them; they sound like a fun bunch!” Su-won said cheerfully, making Ju-do sigh and Mu-ah and Gyoku exchange sheepish smiles at Ju-do’s irritation.

“We’ve been here a day, and Hiyou’s still in hiding. At least the assassins aren’t coming anymore.” Yun said with a sigh near sundown.

“Talk down stubborn; those assassins wouldn’t say a peep about where Hiyou might be.” Jaeha complained.

“They’re drug puppets; all they care about is the next high, and with Hiyou being the one who can bestow or deny that…” Zeno shrugged.

“How are you holding up Yona?” Yun asked, starting to hover.

“Not fine.” Hak cut in before Yona could give any kind of answer. “You can’t be fine after moving around and getting rained on all day, straining yourself.”

“We’re staying at an inn tonight; you’ll get a better night’s sleep someplace warm and dry.” Yun decreed.

Yona sighed. Truthfully, she was feeling too cold and sore to lodge a protest, and between her torch and the group’s collective experience reading her physical appearance, it wasn’t worth arguing.

“Huh? You’re full?” Yun repeated what the proprietor had told him.

“My apologies, the guests who checked in a few minutes ago took my available room.” The proprietor apologized with a slight bow.

“That’s a little strange; this place is small and seemed like it would be cheap…” Yun wondered out loud.

“Not really.” Kija countered, pointing at the posted price.

“It can’t be helped Yun. Let’s go find somewhere else.” Yona said, leading the way out the door.

Once outside, Jaeha handed his pack to Zeno. “Something doesn’t seem right with that man’s wine stock.” He commented. “I’ll see if I can get him to say where he’s buying it.”

“At least come with us so you know where we’ll be staying.” Yun said.

Jaeha nodded in agreement.

“We’re all going to be staying in this one cramped room?!” Lili exclaimed.

“It can’t be helped. This was the only room available. And it’s safer to stick together, right?” Su-won assured her.
“It’s not safe! I’m not married! If something happens-!” Lili started shaking Su-won by his shoulders when he started laughing, but was distracted by some kind of scream from downstairs.

“That was downstairs, right? What was it?” She asked, a little scared despite having witnessed how capable her hired bodyguards were.

“We’ll go see what it is. This is a job for bodyguards.” Su-won reminded Lili as he and Ju-do left the room and went downstairs.

“Excuse me…?” Su-won carefully peeked around the door frame into the entrance. “Is someone there?”

A man in Kai-style clothing had the proprietor pinned to the front desk, his tied-back hair reflecting green in the light of the candle.

The man looked up as Ju-do pushed in front of Su-won, hands on the hilts of his swords. “Are you people staying here? Sorry to disturb your rest.” He apologized.

“Who are you?” Su-won asked.

“I had planned on staying here, but I noticed something foul.” The man explained.

“Foul?”

“Poisoned wine.” He nodded at a bottle.

Su-won picked up the bottle the man indicated. “…Nadai?”

“You know about it?”

“I heard about it once I came to town.”

The ignored proprietor began complaining, feeling a little empowered with other people around. “OWOWOW!!! Let go! I don’t know anything!”

“You don’t know anything and yet you’re selling this to your customers?” The man’s grip on his wrist tightened. “Where did you get it?”

For some reason, Su-won was thinking of dragons as the proprietor answered. “OW! I got it from a store on Third Street called Utsuro! They swore it was good wine!”

Despite the loosening of the hold, the sense of being in the presence of a dragon, like That Night, increased as the man considered the answer. “Anyway, we should dump this.” Su-won remarked, uncorking the bottle and pouring out the wine.

“We’ll just be examining your stock.” The man cheerfully told the proprietor as he joined Su-won in raiding the stock. “If we don’t know which ones are tainted, we’ll just have to get rid of everything.”

Su-won noted as he took the expedite step of sweeping the bottles off the shelves wholesale.

There was a bottle in the corner of the second to top shelf, and Su-won couldn’t contain his excitement when he pulled it out. “Oh! Look at this: it’s the illusive Jade Wine!”

“Isn’t that supposed to be really hard to get? That’s practically the King of Wine!” The man joined his excitement. “Maybe we should keep it…at least save the bottle; those are nearly as valuable as Jade Wine itself!”
The pair burst out laughing as Ju-do facepalmed. *Great, he’s found a kindred soul in some random bystander…this isn’t the time to be fooling around!!!*

“So where are you from? This town is dangerous, so you’d be safer if you leave quickly.” The man told Su-won.

“Thank you for your concern; I’ll be sure to do that. So who are you…?” Su-won trailed off as he realized the man was at the door. “Wait—!”

Su-won blinked as he stared at the empty street. “Where could he have gotten to that quickly?”

“Won! What was the commotion?!” Lili said, panting a little from running down the stairs.

“This inn had Nadai, but it doesn’t appear to be affiliated with Hiyou directly.” Su-won informed her.

“Wasn’t there someone else here?” She asked.

“Yes. He spotted the tainted wine and pressured the proprietor about it. He had unusual green hair and was really cool.” *I wouldn’t mind talking to him without Ju-do hovering; he reminds me of Hak for some reason.*

Lili seemed to recognize the description. “Was he tall and wearing dark-color Kai-style clothing?” She demanded.

Su-won nodded. “Do you know him?” Su-won asked.

“…maybe. He’s one of the traveling entertainers I mentioned earlier. He plays the flute while the girl dances.” She answered slowly.

“Then you just missed him.” Lili groaned at that. “But we do have a clue to check out in the morning.” Su-won assured her.

“A clue?”

“The proprietor said he got the wine from a store called ‘Utsuro’, on Third Street. So we can check that place out in the morning.” Su-won proposed, letting Ju-do herd him and Lili back into the inn and up the stairs.

“That proprietor told me he bought the wine from a store on Third Street, Utsuro. Hiyou’s not there, but…” Jaeha informed the others when he returned.

“We still might learn something there, so it’s worth investigating.” Hak continued, Yona nodding next to him.

“In the morning then.” Yona decided.

Jaeha couldn’t help reflecting back on that guest at the inn. *Too bad we didn’t meet somewhere else; I’d love to talk a man that beautiful into some ‘fun’. But, why did he remind me of Yona-chan?*

With the rest of the room asleep, Ju-do confronted Su-won as he returned from the privy. “What will you do, when we encounter ‘them’?” He quietly demanded.

It was nearly a given that they’d run into Yona and Hak at some point here in Sensui. A drug lord
basically poisoning people? He’d be more surprised if she wasn’t in the thick of it.

“Nothing. Based on the group on the battlefield, at best we’d match by terms of numbers, but not in ability or strength. Hak alone would be hard for us to take, let alone those unknown fighters.” Su-won answered, his mind flashing back to the brawler, the knife thrower, and the swordsman who had been fighting with Hak and Yona that day.

Ju-do forced himself to remain calm, as to not wake the others. “We don’t have the resources to deal with prisoners with just ourselves, and as there has been no formal decree calling for their capture, we’d be seen in the wrong by denying them their liberty, especially Yona-hime’s.”

“And there won’t be a formal decree. No matter how much noise Kei-shuk makes about it.” Su-won said firmly.

“You haven’t told him about how you intend to abdicate to Yona-hime at some point, and have intended so all along?” Ju-do asked.

“The less he knows about that beforehand, the less time he has to try and counter it. With Yona, I don’t trust him.”

With that, Su-won slid back into his futon, ending the conversation.

“‘Utsuro’, ‘Utsuro’…” Lili mumbled the store’s name under her breath as she scanned for signs.

“That’s weird…this is Third Street, right? But there’s no shops, and no one around to ask either.”

*I wonder if Yona will be here today?* “I hope she shows up.” Lili hoped out loud. “Then again, she was injured, and has addicts sent by Hiyou after her, so she might not be able to.”

“I’m pretty sure the man with green hair will be here today, at least.” Su-won reminded her.

“She’s stronger than she looks, especially in will, but she pushes herself too much! And I don’t think the guys she’s travelling with could stop her if she was really determined.” Lili complained, the image of Yona’s wounded back appearing every time she closed her eyes.

“She’s about your age, right?” Su-won asked.

Lili nodded. “She has red hair. Her name is Yona.”

Su-won froze, Ju-do closed his eyes in resignation, while Mu-ah and Gyoku exchanged worried looks. Lili didn’t notice their reactions, as an approaching quartet of people drew closer. “That’s them!” She exclaimed, running over.

The green-haired man from last night was with Yona. Now that he thought about it, there was only one person in history known to have had green hair. *If he’s with Yona, is he…?*

Then Yona looked over at him and froze in shock. “Lili…who are they?” She asked slowly.

Yona was only dimly aware of Lili giving the introductions. The only thought in her head was, *I’m really, REALLY glad Hak followed Shin-ah…and I hope he doesn’t come back right now.*

Taking a deep breath, she addressed Su-won. “Moonlighting as a bodyguard now…” ‘Won?’” Yona said wryly.

“Oh you know…go for a walk and come across a girl in distress…” Su-won said sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.
“Hi-Yona-sama,” Kija started, changing how he was addressing her when Yun elbowed him in the stomach. “Do you know him?”

“We have an acquaintance.” Yona said shortly. The torch pulsed a message to leave it alone.

The wolf whined in submission, while the cat flicked its tail, and the nesting mother hovered close. Lili perked up at hearing this. “Won jumped in to save me when I was attacked by thugs after I got here, kind of like how you jumped in to save me, with that crazy kick.”

“Are you ever going to let that kick go?” Yona complained as Ju-do, Mu-ah, and Gyoku eyed Su-won, watching for his reaction.

“You’re the guest from last night, aren’t you?” Jaeha commented, drawing attention to him.

“You know him too Jaeha?” Yun asked.

“We met last night when I was questioning the proprietor about where he got his wine. I didn’t know he was with Lili-chan.” Jaeha explained.

“I told you they’re a flashy bunch.” Lili remarked, petting Ao.

Su-won took in Yona’s companions, noting again Jaeha’s green hair and the unusual appearance of the right hand of the man with white hair, for all it was downplayed. The Dragon Warriors really are real, aren’t they? He thought, feeling his childhood excitement returning. But how did they fade into myth, if all the Dragon Warriors between the first ones and now were as flashy as these ones?

“Hey, did you learn anything about where Hiyou is? We only have a lead about a shop named ‘Utsuro’.” Lili asked, drawing Yona and Su-won from their mutual distraction.

“That’s all we have—“

“MII-SS!!” The cry cut off Yona’s reply, and a blond-haired, no yellow-haired, boy ran over.

“Zeno? Where’s Raiju and Shin-ah?” Yun asked as Zeno reached them.

“There’s probably a big problem.” Zeno said in lieu of an answer to Hak and Shin-ah’s location.

“‘Probably’?” Kija asked.

“On the sea there’s…” Zeno trailed off as he noticed just who was with Lili. I might be remembering wrong, but he looks and feels like Won-shi! He thought as he stared at Su-won, who blinked in confusion.

“What’s on the sea?” Yun prompted, reining in his irritation at how easily distracted Zeno was.

“Right…on the sea, there’s a bunch of ships approaching.” Zeno informed them.

“Where are they from?” Yun demanded.

“Seiryuu didn’t say…” Zeno answered, and Su-won noted the reference. Right; Seiryuu is the Dragon Warrior with the all-seeing eyes. I’m guessing this boy is Ouryuu, even if he doesn’t look like he has an invulnerable body. He thought as Zeno continued. “Mister says that Hiyou might come out to meet the ships, so they stayed to guard the area.”

“So the ships could belong to whomever Hiyou is getting Nadai from.” Kija noted.
“Still, if it’s a lot of ships, that’s not your average meeting.” Jaeha pointed out. “Something big must be in the works.”

“Fleets of larger than four ships require the permission of that particular Tribe’s General, and more than eight requires royal permission. Lili,” Yona turned to her. “Is there some place high up with a good view of the sea?”

“Yes, the old lighthouse.” Lili replied.

“Show me.” Yona ordered, and the girls took off running.

Chapter End Notes

I know it's because of plot reasons, but you'd think Su-won would notice Zeno calling the others by their dragon, not their names. I know he's distracted by seeing Yona, but still...!
“You—Won-sama, what are your orders?” Gyoku whispered in Su-won’s ear.

“Right now we are Lili’s bodyguards; her orders are my orders.” Su-won answered, before following the girls and the men with Yona.

“That’s not what I—“

“Shut up and obey.” Ju-do grumbled.

“Yes sir…” Gyoku muttered, as he and Mu-ah trailed the others.

Mu-ah was trying to reconcile the rumors he had heard about Princess Yona and the person he had just met. There was no doubt that the girl was the genuine article, going off of Su-won-sama’s and General Ju-do’s reactions to her appearance. Still…

…it was hard to believe that this girl, with a quiver and sword on her back and calluses on her hands was the same perfectly groomed one he had spied at the birthday celebration, or the same one who stood tall and dared Su-won-sama to kill her himself.

Everyone stared at the mass of ships on the horizon. “It’s hard to really see them, but…” Kija started.

“Whomever it is, they’re coming from Southern Kai.” Jaeha noted.

“That looks to be too many ships for a trade fleet…” Yun commented, worried.

“Maybe it’s a tour group!” Zeno suggested, mostly in jest.

“Are they trying to start a war?” Lili demanded.

“That is definitely more than eight ships. Too bad they’re still too far out, otherwise we could see the lord’s emblem. I’m highly doubtful taunting Kouka is a sanctioned act.” Yona half-complained.

The last she had heard, the Emperor’s cousin in Southern Kai was too busy trying to keep the southern lords from killing him or each other, and as the family in control of the Emperor in the north had no sea access, they certainly wouldn’t be trying a sea attack.

“We’ve got enough to deal with, with Hiyou…” Lili somehow kept her voice to ‘worried’ and not at ‘wail’.

“We’ll just have to make them go home.” Su-won declared.

Yona and Zeno bit back giggles at the dumbfounded looks everyone else was giving Su-won, especially Lili and Ju-do. Ju-do’s look was mixed with the all too familiar ‘what am I to do with you’ expression.

“You’re right; we’ll need to send them on their way.” Jaeha agreed after a minute.

“Hiyou might make an appearance, if this is the lord he’s been getting Nadai from.” Su-won pointed
“We can’t let them get too close either, or the locals will be disturbed.” Kija noted.

“Wha? Wait a sec—just how are you going to handle that many ships?!” Lili demanded.

“Give me a minute…” Su-won said distractedly, looking up and muttering to himself.

“Lili; don’t worry. We’ll do something about them.” Yona assured her. “It might be better if you went some place safer and waited—“

“NO!” Lili yelled. “I…I also…am here to fight! I…I know I’m not strong, but…the Water Tribe is my precious place, full of my precious people! So let me fight with you!” Lili’s hands were twisted in her dress, and there were tears at the corners of her eyes.

Su-won moved to assure Lili, but Yona beat him there (like always). “I’m sorry, for insulting you by suggesting you go to safety.” She apologized, wiping Lili’s tears. “The strength best suited to saving the Water Tribe is yours. All of us will do our best to help you, with what we have to offer.”

Once again, Mu-ah and Gyoku were wondering to themselves if this REALLY was Yona-hime-sama, while Ju-do wondered why she had never shown this side of her before.

“Anyway, why are you saying I should get to a safe place when you’re the injured one?” Lili waved off the apology.

“Injured?” Su-won repeated sharply, and Ju-do found himself looking over the princess for injures, and spotting the tension around her eyes and in her stance, before he caught what he was doing and berated himself. You chose your side; you needn’t concern yourself with her anymore, unless she stands in Su-won-sama’s way...

“We ended up coming across a meeting Hiyou was having at the inn we were staying at in Shisen, and Yona got slashed across the back protecting me.” Lili explained.

“Don’t tell him that!” Yona snapped. Catching her rising irritation and temper, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Yun, Kija, and Jaeha traded slightly confused looks over how Yona was acting. Although Yun and Jaeha thought they might know the reason...

“…anyway,” Su-won started awkwardly. “Lili-sama, do you know who in this town is very rich? We’ll need to borrow some ships from them.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’ll also need to talk to the local fishermen.” Su-won continued.

“You’re not planning on talking to the head of the Fisher’s Guild?” Jaeha asked.

“No. But without ships, we can’t go out to sea and ask them to leave.” Su-won replied.

“’Ask them to leave’, huh…” Jaeha repeated, before smirking and heading to the door. “I can take care of that.”

“There is another thing that needs to be done, while you’re at the docks…” Su-won added.

“Let’s go, Yona.” Yun said, only to look at her and find her not moving. “Yona?”
“Actually…I’ll stay behind with Lili.” Yona informed the others.

Su-won, nearly finished telling Jaeha about the other task to be done at the docks, froze. …*what? Is it on account of her injury, or does she not trust me with Lili?*

“You should go with the others to talk to the fishermen, Yun.” Yona told him.

“Then, I will stay with you Hi-Yona-sama.” Kija said, Yun’s elbow once again making him change from ‘Hime-sama’ to ‘Yona-sama’.

Yona shook her head in disagreement. “Your strength will be needed out there, once the fighting starts. You should go.”

“I cannot do that.” Kija protested. “That’s…”

“My bodyguards are pretty skilled, so you don’t need to worry about our wellbeing.” Lili tried to reassure Kija. “They’ll protect Yona.”

Su-won and Ju-do didn’t say anything to counter this, so Mu-ah and Gyoku stayed quiet as well.

“Zeno will stay with the Miss!” Zeno carefully hugged Yona’s arm.

Kija couldn’t contain his shock. “You…?”

“Zeno will protect the Miss with his life! If something happens, we’ll run away.” Zeno assured Kija.

“But—“ *I’ve never seen you fight. I trust your devotion to Hime-sama, but will that be enough?*

“Hakuryuu,” Kija paused at this, and Su-won wondered how any of this was staying quiet when they were saying what-who-they were. “When Zeno says he’ll protect the Miss, she will never be injured. He swears on the name of Ouryuu.”

Kija felt his breath catch in his throat, and for once he saw what Jaeha had mentioned, about Zeno possibly being older than he said he was. “…stay safe.” Kija said as he departed, something in his dragon’s blood telling him that he could place utter trust in Zeno’s vow.

“We should be going too. The richest merchants should be at the guild hall by now.” Lili said, Su-won and Yona carefully avoiding each other’s eyes.

“Be sure to watch our backs!” Zeno told Mu-ah and Gyoku cheerfully, before taking up a spot between them and Yona.

“…why does it feel like he just threatened us?” Gyoku muttered to Mu-ah.

“As long as it wasn’t just me.” Mu-ah muttered back.

To his surprise, Ju-do found himself walking next to Yona. “Ju-do.” He looked at her. “How did he come to learn Uncle’s death wasn’t an accident?”

“I told him.” Ju-do admitted.

“And how did you learn of it?” She wasn’t looking at him, yet what he could see of her expression had him suppressing shivers.
“...I found the Prince’s body. Everything about the scene felt wrong, like it was staged. I shared those suspicions.” He finally told her.

“Was it your idea?” She asked.

“No.”

“Kei-shuk’s, then?”

His silence was enough of an answer for her. “He really should spend some time to find the Secret Archives.” She informed him with a look out of the corner of her eye. “I think both of you will find the contents enlightening.”

“What do you mean? How do you know?!” He exclaimed quietly, wondering just what could possibly be in the hypothetical Secret Archives that would be ‘enlightening’.

She turned her head slightly towards him, and he would swear that there was fire burning in her eyes. “You chose your side. I owe you no answers, and there are none you are entitled to demand.”

With that, she sped up her pace, moving ahead of him in a clear dismissal. Clearly, we were wrong to disregard her during the planning. How could she have hidden this side of her so thoroughly?

“None of you cared to look.” Ju-do only just contained his jump as Zeno’s voice came from his side. “Like she said, you chose your side. You had no reason to pay any attention to the other side.” Then this weird, blond boy who spoke of himself in the third person placed himself between him and the Princess, who was behind Su-won-sama.

She doesn’t trust Su-won-sama, so she won’t show him her injured back, while the person she does trust guards her back.

Ju-do reflected. But just how powerful could this boy be, to so casually act as a human shield? Why do I get the feeling that this ‘Zeno’ could be more terrifying than Hak?

Yona could only sigh inwardly as Lili tried to get ships from Sensui’s Trade Association. She kept her glare on a pair that Zeno’s investigations had revealed to be middlemen in Hiyou’s organization, acting as distributors between the manufacture of the tainted wine and the shops where unsuspecting customers were exposed.

“LISTEN!!” Su-won only just dodged Lili’s fist as she slammed it on the wall. “WE HAVE NO TIME!!”

Lili took a brief second to calm herself before continuing. “Hasn’t Hiyou hindered your businesses and everyday lives these past several years?! Southern Kai has come to occupy Sensui! I came here, because I want to beat up Hiyou for the poison he has spread in my precious Water Tribe. Are you all right with that?! ARE YOU REALLY ALL RIGHT WITH HAVING EVERYTHING TAKEN AWAY FROM YOU AND BOWING TO A FOREIGN POWER?!?!?”

One man, So-an, sighed. “We’ve tried resisting, and Hiyou crushed us without effort. If we give you our ships and retaliate, we’ll be killed.”

“I see; you are cowards.” Lili stated. “I’ll put you somewhere out of the way. I am going the soldiers stationed to Sensui and bring them here. Once I do, bring out your ships.”

“This girl’s bizarre talk has only grown stranger. Those soldiers haven’t done a thing up to this point. Our own general has not lifted a finger to aid this town thus far. There’s nothing, no amount of money, that will get the garrison to move—“
“If I bring the garrison here, will you bring out your ships or not?!” Lili demanded, cutting So-an off. With an expression that clearly said he was humoring her, So-an said, “IF the garrison does come, we’ll make our ships available to you.”

Lili nodded sharply. “Now, as to your safety—“

“We’re better off barricading them in here.” Yona spoke up.

With deliberate motion she walked to stand in front of the two accessories. “After all, certain rats will scurry back and give away our plans otherwise. Won’t they? Shi-jin? Kanto?”

The man Lili had asked to recognize who her family was, Ko-an, rose to his feet in protest. “Just what are you accusing them of?!”

“Oh I’m not accusing them of anything; I’m just stating the facts. All of you have suffered downturns in business since Hiyou took over, except for these two here. Why do you think that would be?” Leaning down, she tapped the crest on Shi-jin’s, then Kanto’s, shoulders. “So how much did he offer you, to bring him the red-haired woman’s head? What amount of money was enough to go from negligent homicide to first degree murder?”

Shi-jin paled. “Wh-I hav—!”

“I tend to pay attention to people trying to kill me and mine.” Yona noted. “At least half of the drug puppets bore one of your crests. If you’ve been wondering when they’ll return, don’t bother. They won’t be coming back.”

“You—you killed—“ Kanto’s words were cut off as Zeno, who had approached him, unseen, from behind, grabbed his wrist and jerked his hand out of his sleeve.

He held the hand up, so the room could see how discolored and cracked the nails were. “I think we can see the bounty this one was hoping for.”

The other merchants were too stunned to rise any protest. Noticing the look Yona was sending her, Lili gave the order. “Knock them out and tie them up.”

With a sharp look from Su-won, Ju-do, Mu-ah, and Gyoku joined Su-won in doing just that.

“Like I said, I pay attention when people are trying to kill me.” Yona reminded her.

“…so are they really dead?” Lili asked quietly.

“You remember the riot? How it took a lot of force to knock them out?” She hadn’t paid that much attention, but Lili nodded regardless. “Imagine trying to knock someone out while they are hell-bent on killing you. That’s a recipe for injury. As cruel and callous as it seems, killing them was probably the kindest thing to do.”

Remembering the addicts the morning after the riot, and what Yona had said of the withdrawal side effects, Lili had to concede she was right. “Now for the garrison.”

“So how will you get them to listen to you?” Yona asked. I wonder if it’s survived all these years? I know Shuten’s didn’t, nor Zeno’s…
“…there’s an item, used by the Water General. The soldiers have to listen to any order given by the person holding it. I’ll be in epic trouble when I get back to Suiko, but it’ll be worth it, if I can save the Water Tribe with it.” Lili whispered in Yona’s ear.

Yona thought she knew just what it was, but she’d have to see it to know for certain.

Continuing to the garrison, stopping briefly at a meat bun vendor after Lili’s stomach growled loud enough for everyone to hear, followed by Yona’s, Su-won somehow found himself in step with Yona. The tension between them was thick enough for Lili to notice. I wonder what happened between them? Lili wondered, before shrugging it off as a question for later.

Su-won chewed his lip, debating on if he should say anything. Although what he could say, beyond idle chit-chat, he didn’t know. Frankly, he was trying to figure out why she was willingly walking next to him, even with how tense she was. “The lesser of two evils.” She murmured, just loud enough for him to hear, and he understood what she wasn’t saying.

When it came to Kouka’s internal troubles, they were allies. Wary allies, but allies nonetheless.

It hit him then, what he could talk about. “I’ve reached his wedding.” He whispered back, trusting she’d understand what he meant.

“Are you enjoying it?”

‘Do you know?’

“Once I passed the execution, even though it’s missing details I’d like to know.” He replied quietly.

“What you deem important isn’t the same as what he did.” She explained.

“How could they disappear, despite how flashy they are?” He had to ask. I doubt the flashiness of the present-day Dragon Warriors is something new.

She smirked, an expression he couldn’t recall seeing on her face, outside of those dreams that he Did Not Think About. “One heir a generation doesn’t mean one child a generation.” The smirk faded into a sad half-smile. “Even if the methods are disagreeable.”

Huh, so there’s whole clans related to the Dragon Warriors, who’ve helped hide them from the world in ways she doesn’t agree with. That…makes a lot of sense. While Su-won pondered this, he noticed she slowed, letting him pull ahead while she drew even with the yellow-haired Ouryuu (?) I wish I could have seen this side of her before.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, double talk, how fun…

A bit shorter than usual, but this is a good stopping point, since I’m planning on sticking with Yona’s side of things. I should hopefully get through the fighting next chapter.
Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The garrison was in chaos when they arrived. “It appears that they’ve noticed the fleet approaching.” Su-won noted, almost unnecessarily.

“Are you ready, Lili?” Yona asked gently.

Lili nodded firmly. “In the end, be it Nadai or Hiyou, the people of Water must stand up to them or forfeit their future. And I have to do this, to protect them.”

“’Help those who help themselves’.” Zeno murmured as they reached the gate.

“I need to speak to the captain.” Lili told the gate guard.

“What business do you have with Captain Ramul?!” The guard demanded.

“This is urgent! I—“ Su-won cut Lili off with a hand on her shoulder. “We don’t have time to cajole our way in. Are you going to deny entrance to the daughter of General An Jun-gi, An Lili?“

“What?” The guards were dumbstruck.

“You’ve surely been watching the fleet out at sea, correct? This is an emergency situation, so please relay to your Captain Ramul that Lady An Lili is here to see him.” Yona picked up smoothly.

As the one guard ran to inform Captain Ramul, Su-won looked at Yona with a raised eyebrow. She returned it with a look that said he was an idiot to think she didn’t know who Lili was. “You could’ve asked first.” Lili grumbled quietly.

“There’s a time for niceties, and a time for commanding. This is not a time or place for niceties.” Yona whispered in her ear, Su-won nodding in agreement.

_Aren’t they supposed to be enemies? I mean, no matter if it was for the good of the country, Yona-hime would still see Su-won-sama’s actions as unjust. So why are they playing nice? Mu-ah wondered._

“Kouka is more important than their conflict.” Zeno quietly remarked at Mu-ah’s elbow. “That is something they can both agree on.”

_Is this kid a mind reader or something?_

“You…you want us to mobilize against Southern Kai’s fleet?” Captain Ramul repeated, dazed. “But it’s so unprecedented! And, even with your orders, Lili-sama…to suddenly do something like that is…”

Lili pulled off the bundle she had been wearing this whole time, pulling out a medium-sized box. “Do you know what this is?” She asked, placing it on the table.

Removing the lid, the room marveled at the item revealed. “Isn’t that your old paperweight?” Shuten asked Abi.
“You once had a matching one, you know…” Abi replied with a sweatdrop.

“This is the symbol of the Water Tribe General, the Water’s Golden Seal.” Lili began. “I understand that the reason you can’t mobilize is because of your loyalty to my father. I acknowledge that. However,”

Looking up, Captain Ramul couldn’t help being taken aback by the look in her eyes. “The Water Tribe is in a time of crisis. From this point on, consider my words as the words of the General of the Water Tribe.”

The assembled troops bowed in acknowledgement. “Lili-sama, with all due respect, I do not believe we can easily engage the fleet. Is there any back-up…”

“I have a plan.” Su-won said, stepping forward. “The merchants of the town will lend us their ships. So please, hurry with your preparations.”

“Still…will be have a fighting chance?” Ramul asked.

“Of course; the Raiju will be fighting with you, will he not?” Su-won asked Yona.

“Yes; the Raiju will lend his strength to this fight. And not just him.” Yona said, stepping forward. “With him are three others. While you will not believe me now, should I name them, trust me when I say that, by the end of today, you will know the truth of the myths.”

“So, now what should we do? Lili-sama.” Su-won asked after seeing the garrison troops off.

“Hmmmm…we should find a good place to observe the sea battle. But first…” She grabbed Yona’s arm. “There’s a girl problem we need to deal with.”

“Eh?” Blinking, Su-won and the others could only stare after the pair. “Girl problem?”

“She couldn’t have just said ‘privy’?” Gyoku asked with a sweatdrop.

“Why DO girls go to the privy in packs anyway?” Mu-ah asked out loud.

“Safety in numbers. Those who go after women prefer single targets. The more women in a group, the safer they are. It’s probably some kind of instinct.” Zeno explained with a shrug.

“I always thought it was so they could gossip about whatever guys they’re with…” Mu-ah admitted.

Ju-do closed his eyes and reminded himself that until the girls returned, there wasn’t anything to do. Even if his urge to give in to his frustration was strong.

“Lili, what is it?” Yona asked once they reached the privy.

“Well, first of all, I was thinking you might need a bit of help, in here, and didn’t want to draw attention to it. Second,” Lili waved a finger in Yona’s face. “What is with you and Won? You two are really tense around each other!”

“…you’re right, about needing some help, in here, and it’s better to take advantage of this opportunity…” Yona admitted, going first.

“And Won?” Lili asked during her turn, voice muffled through the door.
Yona stayed quiet. “Yona?” Lili asked as she exited.

“I’ll tell you after we’ve taken care of the fleet and Hiyou. I promise.” Yona replied, starting back.

Something in Yona’s expression told Lili to leave it, for now.

“ Took long enough.” Ju-do grumbled as they returned.

“Girl problem solutions can’t be rushed.” Yona said simply.

Su-won, who had been doing some mental calculations, suddenly turned red, realizing just what ‘girl problem’ the girls had gone to take care of. Ju-do, Mu-ah, and Gyoku exchanged baffled looks, while Zeno bit back a snicker.

“Woah, they really did take care of the fleet with just the troops stationed here.” Mu-ah marveled.

“But why did it look like there was someone jumping from ship to ship, as high as the masts…?”

“That would probably Jaeha. The crew he had been with before nicknamed him ‘the soaring dragon’.” Yona replied with a half-smile. “I do hope one of them remembered to grab what I asked for.”

“Grab what?” Su-won asked.

“A copy of the lord’s crest and any ledgers or papers on board.” She replied.

“How can you be sure that there would be any ledgers related to his dealings with Hiyou?” Gyoku asked.

“If he’s in it for the money, which is likely, he’ll need to keep track of money made illicitly, so he can keep it separate from his legal gains, so he’s not taxed for them.” Yona explained.

“I’m sure Hiyou has been watching like us.” Su-won remarked. “Now we just have to wait and see what he does now.”

“Get on Zeno’s back Miss! Your back injury must be bothering you, so let Zeno give you a piggy back ride.” Zeno suggested, leaning down for Yona to get on.

“We’re too close in height; I’m not sure it will work…” Yona declined.

“Maybe we should find a place where you can sit and rest. Or…hey, Won?” Lili asked. “Maybe you could give Yona a piggy back ride instead of Zeno?”

Both Su-won and Yona turned bright red. “N-no I—I need—that is—!” Su-won stuttered out.

“Bad idea!!! He’ll need his sword arm free!” Yona protested, waving her hands. “I’m fine; really!”

“No you’re not!” Lili countered. “You always seem to push yourself too much!”

Suddenly, Zeno darted in front of Yona, arms spread. “GET DOWN!!! ARROWS INCOMING! ARCHERS EAST BUILDING SECOND FLOOR!”

Everyone tensed, as Mu-ah and Gyoku flanked Lili. Zeno began pushing Yona down into a crouch, covering her with his body, when Su-won stepped between them and the incoming arrows.

Then Ju-do was in front of Su-won, slicing the arrows out of the air.
If Yona needed any more proof that Su-won did not want her dead, this was it. That tiny part of her that still clung to her crush squealed at being protected by him.

“Did they find out the troops were moved?!” Lili asked, Gyoku pushing her back down as more arrows flew.

“No, they’re after…” Yona… Su-won’s heart lodged in his throat, even as the unfamiliar pangs of anger began. Kei-shuk always spoke vaguely, and in the practicalities of killing Yona, but here, faced with an active threat...

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Yona grab one of the fired arrows and draw her bow.

He placed his hand on hers’, stopping her. “Stop. Do you want an arrow to the head?” He whispered harshly, angry not only at these people trying to kill her, but at her own recklessness. “Their arrowheads are poisoned. Drop the arrow.”

With a scowl, she dropped the arrow. “Stay back.” He ordered, going to engage the attackers.

Yona couldn’t help clenching her fists. “Damnit why does he have to be right?! Yet I hate just sitting here helpless.”

“Mu-ah, Gyoku, guard Lili-sama and the others. Ju-do you take the back and I’ll take the front.” Su-won ordered, him and Ju-do darting in opposite directions.

Zeno rubbed the top of Yona’s head. “Miss isn’t completely calm, around him.”

“…I know. There’s really only one enemy that matters, right now.” She admitted.

“Well, when you’re ready to make your move, Zeno will help, as your shield.”

Her lips turned up briefly. “Let’s skirt the edge, and check for archers on the roofs.” She said.

Moving slowly, they had reach the other corner when she saw the archer on the roof, aiming at Su-won.

Su-won, on the other hand, found himself disgusted at how one drug could corrupt people this badly. Slashing down one man, and making sure he stayed down, an arrow flew just over his head. Turning to where the arrow had been fired from, his mind just finished processing the archer on the roof when an arrow lodged under his left arm. The angle of it meant that it had to have pierced the heart.

And the one who fired the fatal arrow, was Yona.

The pair shared a long look, before looking away. Su-won returning to clearing his side of the building, and Yona to checking for rooftop archers.

Ju-do ran over to see if Su-won needed help in time to see the spoiled Crown Princess fire an arrow, and another rooftop archer fall dead. “It would be better if you limited your movements.” He said once he drew close, since the boy hovering by her was more intent on acting as a human shield.

“I will move as I wish. I am the one Hiyou wants dead, so it would be better for you to keep your distance.” She replied.

Despite himself, Ju-do found memories of the loud, childish Princess as a girl floating in his head.

“Why can’t you stay out of my sight?” Ju-do mumbled. If you did, I would not have to worry about the risk Hak could pose to Su-won-sama.
“I’m done being the ignorant girl everyone thought I was. I will not look away from the suffering of
the people. This is my Kingdom as well.” She reminded him, and he understood what Su-won had
meant, as her expression reminded him of the late King Ju-nam.

*I may not fully understand why Su-won-sama still wants you to succeed him, or know why you hid
this side of you, but right now, you are a civilian in danger. Ju-do took up a ready stance between
the Princess and the weird boy with her, and the approaching man carrying an axe. I cannot have
any feelings for you beyond that.*

The attackers dealt with, people started filling the streets, attention drawn to the burning fleet out at
sea. “I guess the scuffle off the coast has alarmed people.” Su-won noted.

“We need to find Hiyou quickly. But where could he be?” Lili complained, eyeing the crowd.

It was then that Yona felt that corrosive darkness, full of death, strong enough to make her stagger.
Ignoring Lili’s questioning about her health, she frantically scanned the crowd, before she spotted
that dark demon of corruption. “I will never forget your face.”

Zeno lunged between her and Hiyou, being the only one close enough to do anything. Su-won,
never expecting Hiyou to appear right there, found himself hesitating in shock.
He could not close the distance between him and Hiyou before his sword pierced Yona or Ouryuu (?).

Yona could feel Yellow Brother inside of Zeno, his power concentrated on his torso, ready for scales
to erupt once the sword reached his skin.

But the sword never reached Zeno.

There was Hak, with Hiyou’s sword buried in his left arm.

Everyone couldn’t help staring at Hak, dumbfounded and trying to figure out where he had appeared
from.

Hiyou tried to withdraw his sword, but for some reason it wouldn’t move. “M…move!” He ordered,
his rage overcoming his fear of this man. “MY BUSINESS IS WITH THAT GIRL!!!”

That was the last mistake Hiyou ever made.

Yona bit back a wince as Hak’s punch crushed Hiyou’s jaw and sent him flying. Judging by the
angle of the drug lord’s head when he finally hit the ground, his neck was broken too. He would no
longer be a problem.

Then Hak caught sight of Su-won.

Dark fire raged, and he wrenched the sword from his arm before charging at Su-won, who seemed
frozen.

The pair of soldiers accompanying Su-won, Mu-ah and Gyoku, were dealt with without thought.

Ju-do fared little better, not even managing to land a blow before Hak’s kick sent him flying.

Kija and Jaeha intercepted Hak, feet from Su-won. Kija caught a punch to the face before he could
grab Hak with his dragon arm. Despite his strength, Kija found himself drug forward, inch by inch.
Jaeha got a punch to the stomach, dropping him to his knees as he coughed.
Shin-ah hesitated, a hand on his mask. He didn’t want to kill Hak, and he knew the paralysis was temporary when used on the other dragons, but would that apply to Hak? Not to mention the man Hak was trying to attack; he looked important, in a way that meant bad things if he saw his power in action.

Su-won knew he should be moving, reacting, something. But the dark fire froze him. And this was how he had always envisioned Hak killing him. Suddenly Yona was between them, cupping Hak’s fist in her hands. “Hak, I’m alright. I’m safe.”

The dark fire pulled back, and Hak slumped in the hold of a person who had to be Hakuryuu, since his hand was twice the size a hand should be, and scaled.

“I told you, your life means more to me than his death.”

This statement, spoken so matter of fact…

…hurt.

*How different would things be, if I was like her, putting those I care for over revenge?* Su-won wondered as Hakuryuu hauled Hak over his shoulder and departed, trailed by the green-haired Ryokuryuu (?) and the pretty boy (Yun, he thought Yona had called him).

“I could forgive you for killing Father, someday.” This statement stunned Su-won and Ju-do, who was in the middle of standing. “But,”

She looked over her shoulder at them with fire eyes. “I can never forgive you for all the pain you’ve caused Hak, with your betrayal.”

Then she was walking away, back straight despite the wound concealed under her clothes, the masked swordsman and the unusual blond man following in a rearguard position.

“Su-won-sama.” Mu-ah prodded, and before Lili realized it, she was all alone.

With no idea what else to do, she slowly started towards the docking borrowed ships, to meet up with Captain Ramul.

Hiyou’s body laid where it had landed, and, beyond a vague mental note to have someone retrieve it, ignored.

Omake (?) Kei-Shuk Has a Weird Walk

Or:

Hiryuu Castle Takes Hints From Hogwarts

Kei-Shuk looked right and left with a frown. *I guess I haven’t learned the layout as well as I thought, since I can’t remember if I go left or right here…*

He was trying to get back to his office from the kitchens, since he had worked through lunch again. “Wait…” He glared at the mural before him, which had a stylized version of the coronation of Hiryuu-ou. “…I’ve past this three times since leaving the kitchens.”

*Alright, I’m pretty sure I’ve gone right three or four times in a row, so let’s try left…*

Three minutes later he was glaring at what he KNEW was the same. Damn. Mural. *But how the hell*
Suddenly it hit him that he had made a wrong turn when he left the kitchens. “I really need to stop reading and walking at the same time…” He mumbled to himself as he backtracked to his starting point.

Had anyone who could see spirits been present, they would be forgiven for thinking Ha-kun was some kind of evil spirit or demon. “That was a great job!” She praised, turning to the tiny dragon cradled in her arms.

“Ha-kun…are you teaching the castle bad habits?” Hiryuu asked with a sweatdrop.

No matter how much he enjoyed watching Kei-Shuk wander aimlessly, he’d really, really like it if the castle didn’t start thinking that messing with the layout was something to do with everyone.

“Of course not! She needs to practice in case she’s stormed!” Ha-kun didn’t even try any pretense of innocence, sticking with her look of unholy glee. “And don’t give me that look; I know you’re the one who had her make the mural look the same each time.” She complained with a glare as she passed him the tiny dragon that was the newborn Shield of the Sovereign.

Knowing exactly who was in charge, Hiryuu kept his mouth shut.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry Ju-do, but since Hak’s Ankoukuryuu now, he’s too fast for you to hit anymore.

So yes, Hiryuu Castle is the ‘shield of the sovereign’ from Ik-su’s prophecy. Who’s the sword? You’ll just have to keep reading… (halo with horns)
“Huh…so that was the infamous Su-won.” Jaeha commented quietly to the others.

Yona had retreated into the smaller tent with Hak once Yun had finished patching up the stab on his left arm, so as long as they spoke quietly… “I’m not sure what I had expected, but I hadn’t expected what we got.”

“How could Hime-sama have handled being in his presence?!” Kija whispered harshly. “Never mind chose to stay in his presence!”

“The Miss and the little king are both pragmatic enough to put the common enemy that is Kouka’s internal troubles ahead of their own quarrel. Avoiding civil war is why she didn’t press a claim to the throne after she reached Fuuga, when she and Mister fled. That said, Zeno knows it wasn’t exactly easy for her; she was tense the whole time. Her wound is probably aching like crazy.” Zeno explained. “Legally speaking, there’s nothing the little king or any of his people can do to either of them if they are not engaging in illegal activity.”

“Because Yona and Raiju aren’t officially wanted?” Yun asked, sorting through his medicines looking for any numbing agent. “All I’ve heard in the markets are rumors. There hasn’t been any official announcement or decree relating to them. Hell, Hiryuu Castle hasn’t even said they’re ‘missing’.”

“What kind of rumors?” Kija asked.

“Hmm…that Raiju killed King Il and kidnapped Yona is always part one; part two is either he killed her then himself after she rejected his advances, or that they planned everything together after King Il condemned the match.” Yun said, leaning away as the others turned murderous. “The second one I’ve only heard once, when we stopped at that market outside Kuuto for Raiju to sell the other two horses.” He hurriedly added.

“I’m not stopping Hak, next time.” Kija decided. “I wouldn’t have stopped him this time, if I’d known.”

“…but Yona doesn’t want Su-won dead, does she?” Shin-ah spoke up.

“When it comes down to it, what Yona-chan wants doesn’t matter if he does try to kill her.” Jaeha remarked with a frown.

“Zeno couldn’t read the little king very well, but…” Zeno trailed off for a moment, thinking. “…when archers appeared in the upper levels of the buildings, he got between them and the Miss. And Zeno doesn’t think it was just because he was acting as Miss Lili’s bodyguard and following her orders.”

“Oh, right. Zeno, it seemed like you were surprised to see Su-won.” Yun brought up Zeno’s reaction when he first saw Su-won in Sensui.

Zeno blinked. “He reminded Zeno of someone from a long time ago, so it startled him.” How did I not notice the resemblance before? Was it because this time I was close enough to really see his face and feel his aura?
The group fell silent, save for the sounds of the fire. After finding the numbing agent he had been looking for, and tossing it in the tent, Yun turned to the bundle he had retrieved from the fleet’s flagship. “I guess we’ll give these to Lili…I’ll ask Yona in the morning.”

Hak kept waiting for Yona to say or do something, anything, but all she did, after he got in the bedroll (following Yun’s order to rest and knowing he’d likely be asleep soon from something Yun slipped him), was curl up on his right side, latching onto his arm in a vice grip. The silence between them was heavy, and he could hear some of what the others were saying.

He jolted when a small jar landed on his stomach. She picked it up before he did. “…it’s numbing agent.” She said quietly. “I was tense, the whole time.”

Somewhat reluctantly, they both sat up, and he realized bandages had been tossed in with the numbing agent. For ease of access, she was wearing the dress and under robe she had worn in Awa.

It was awkward, undoing the bandages with one hand even with her helping as much as she could, but then the wound was revealed and he faced his greatest failure to date. Thanks to the last bit of senju herb salve, fragile new skin sealed the wound. “It looks like you didn’t reopen it.” He told her. Somehow.

He was leery of touching the slash, because feeling it would make real how his princess’s once-flawless skin was marred by something harsher than the calluses on her hands. “Flawed jade, remember?” She whispered, looking over her shoulder at him.

Even with this silent permission given, she still jumped a little as he began applying the numbing agent, his touch feather-light. “Am I a bad person? For so easily moving past Father’s murder, but lingering on the pain he caused you?” She asked, making him pause in the middle of rubbing the agent in with marginally firmer touches. “I feel like I should be. I could maybe forgive him, one day, for killing Father but it feels wrong, even if Father would approve because part of me still wants that dream and does it cheapen the act if it’s as much about personal feelings as any kind of moral high ground?” Her shoulders trembled. “But then I remember how hurt you are, that mix of sorrow and anger and how most of the time your smiles and laughs are still a little sad and then all I want is his blood on my sword as I return all that pain to him…”

She turned, hiding her face in his chest as he hugged her tight. “I want to go home.” She admitted, a shameful secret concealed in her heart until that moment. “I love and cherish everyone and wouldn’t trade our experiences for anything…but…why I can’t I bring them back with me, to that sunny place?”

Yona pulled back a little, sniffing and wiping her eyes. “I’m sorry…you don’t need my weakness in this on you…not with…”

Hak cut her off with a kiss, tasting the salt of her tears. “You are far from weak.” He murmured after the kiss ended, only pulling back enough to speak. “I’m the weak one, for so easily letting my anger consume me. You draw strength from your connections to people. Not like him, who can so easily cast people aside because he doesn’t connect as strongly to people.”

Silence passed between them as they managed to replace the bandages, returning to their previous positions once she redressed. “You’re not weak, but since both of us think of the other as strong…we should probably just disagree and move on.” She proposed gently.

“If you say so.” He agreed with the implication of a shrug in his voice. “Yun grabbed what you wanted.”
“…in a day or two I’ll send Jaeha and Zeno to Kuuto. I won’t be surprised if he and General Guen-Tae attacked southern Kai. Between the Nadai here in Water and Kum-ji’s human trafficking, he has all the pretext needed to reclaim the land Father gave away from Earth.” She finally said cautiously.

“If he doesn’t do anything to you or me I won’t do anything to him.” He assured her.

She wasn’t a hundred percent sure he would actually be able to follow through with this promise the next time they saw Su-won in person, but she didn’t voice this. “Maybe we can learn something about Nadai’s origins and manufacture process in southern Kai.” She said instead. “You do realize you kicked Ju-do away before he could even touch you.”

Hak blinked, a bit stunned. “For real?”

Yona nodded. “So if nothing else, Ju-do will want you dead.”

“I should have warned of Hak’s likely response upon seeing me, once I realized he was in Sensui.” Su-won apologized to Mu-ah and Gyoku after they stopped for the night.

Somehow, the three only had bumps and bruises, although Mu-ah would need to have his left arm looked at. It was painful for him to move, so it was bound in a sling.

“We survived being attacking by the Raiju for real; that’s a miracle in itself.” Gyoku said, having been through one of Hak’s ‘training sessions’. “Although General Ju-do seems disappointed with how things turned out.”

‘Disappointed’ was a mild understatement. On any other man, Ju-do’s expression and posture would read ‘sulking’.

“Still,” Mu-ah commented between bites of his rice ball. “The Princess isn’t anything like the advisor said she was.”

This caught Su-won and Ju-do’s attention. “What do you mean?” Su-won asked.

Mu-ah and Gyoku traded looks. “Well, I didn’t DIRECTLY here what he said, but…” Swallowing hard, Mu-ah found the courage to continue. “Apparently, Crown Princess Yona is a childish spendthrift who’d bankrupt the kingdom and demanded to be treated as a god because of her haircolor.”

The last part came out in a rush of words, as Su-won’s expression turned murderous.

Gyoku blinked. “Childish I’d grant, but everything else after that is totally not true.” He said with a frown. “Even then, it seemed like the childishness was played up, most of the time.”

“Where is Kei-shuk getting ‘spendthrift’ from?” Ju-do demanded. “He saw the books; if anything she underspent.” He eyed Su-won, wondering if he’d have to disarm him before they reached the castle and saw Kei-shuk.

“My quarrel has always been with the late King II. Yona-hime was and is not a part of it.” Su-won’s eyes were dark as he said this. “So just is the general opinion of My cousin?”

“…most don’t seem to have an opinion in either direction.” Gyoku admitted. “Many of those who chose you do so in the memory of your father, and because they have not seen anything that would indicate she has any sort of martial ability.”

“The group who were there, when she fled, however…they would follow her, if it wasn’t a fluke.” Mu-ah added.
The standing order on these excursions was that they were to speak freely, as long as they were outside Kuuto. “Were it not for Your Majesty and General Ju-do’s reaction to seeing her, I could almost think she was someone else.”

“But where’d she find those guys with her and former General Hak?” Gyoku wondered. “Especially that blond kid. Whoever they are, they seem to be loyal to her.”

“…I know Uncle believed Yona-hime to be Hiryuu-ou’s reincarnation. I don’t think he ever shared that belief with her. But even if he had, Kei-shuk is completely wrong, about her demanding treatment as a god.” Su-won said slowly. “What would the reaction be, should word be spread among the soldiers that she is My heir and intended successor? And that in all likelihood, she was the one who killed Kan Su-jin?”

Ju-do only barely contained his urge to demand just what Su-won was thinking, so casually revealing that to them. As it was, he still stared at Su-won in shock.

Humming to himself, Mu-ah finally moved his hand in a ‘so-so’ gesture. “I’d say they would need to see a bit more, to wholeheartedly follow her. But I think the overall response would be favorable; not many people actually believed what Advisor Kei-shuk has said about her.” He added, Gyoku nodding in agreement.

“But there are those who do.” Ju-do stated. Kei-shuk saying those things…that’s not ‘the practicality of death’; that’s ‘I don’t like you’.

“It’s a few of the old timers, who had served directly under the late Prince Yuhon, or the sons of those who had. Maybe…twelve people?” Mu-ah said, mentally counting up those he had heard express a negative opinion about Yona-hime, or seemed to believe what Kei-shuk had said.

The conversation died as Su-won took in all that he had learned. Kei-shuk…just what are you hiding, about your feelings towards Yona? Ever since the beginning, in the initial planning, you’ve advised killing her, to avoid civil war. You say the sovereign should be the highest power, like Father, but would that apply to Yona? If she was on the throne now, would you obey her? Or would you plot to kill her? Are you plotting to kill her now? He stared into the fire, not really seeing it. I honestly don’t know what I would have done, if Hak had not leapt in. Could I really have stood by, as her blush of dawn brightness was extinguished? Could I have honored that demand, to kill her myself?

It was an uncomfortable feeling, realizing he maybe hadn’t quite thrown all his feelings away. I’d be stuck between a rock and a hard place; how could I have kept her silent? Especially this her.

He finally opted to close his eyes and pretend to sleep, only for that weird blond boy’s face to pop up. Something about him seems…familiar…I’m pretty sure he’s Ouryuu…

Ju-do, Mu-ah, and Gyoku traded looks as Su-won fell ‘asleep’, but said nothing. Frankly, the events in Sensui had left all of them shook up. Soon, Ju-do was the only one still awake. Hak is really too dangerous to be left alive. But why did he feel like a dragon back there? Well, how you’d think a dragon would feel; it’s not like they’re real...

“I’m glad Ju-do didn’t call me on saying I’d kill Hak next time. I KNOW he didn’t believe me…” Su-won let himself flop, undignified, onto his bed, grateful to be back in the castle, late the next day.

Even with a scheming Kei-shuk, battle plans with southern Kai to draw up, and the bizarre new feeling of…”unwelcome”? ‘Wariness’?

Sitting up, he moved towards his desk. “I guess I need to wait for something from Lili, to know if
Yona’s people grabbed what she was hoping they’d grab.” He commented, running a hand through his hair.

A stack of ledgers and paper suddenly came into view in front of him. There was a scrap of cloth with a lord’s crest on it. “The Miss asked Zeno to deliver this.” The weird blond boy said.

“Thank you.” Not really thinking about it, Su-won accepted the stack, only to nearly drop it when it processed that he wasn’t as alone in his room as he thought he was. Barely catching and keeping hold of it, he ogled at Zeno. “How’d you get in here?!?” He demanded, fumbling and only just reaching the desk before he dropped the whole thing and wrecked any kind of meaningful order to it.

“Hiryuu Castle is full of secret passages. It’s how the Miss snuck out into Kuuto, and Zeno snuck in to deliver his reports.” He explained.

“But how did you get all the way here from Sensui? Is she…?” Su-won missed the hopeful note in his voice.

“Ryokuryuu carried Zeno! But he’s outside Kuuto.” He explained.

“I…see…” Su-won said, more to say something in reaction to Zeno.

“Hakuryuu is of a mind not to stop the Mister, next time, and Ryokuryuu is still more likely to bed the little king than kill him.” Zeno revealed casually, making Su-won choke on nothing. “He likes beauty, no matter if male or female.”

“…how have I not been swamped by rumors of the Four Dragon Warriors, when it doesn’t seem like you’re going to any great lengths to hide it?” Su-won asked with a sweat drop, choosing not to figure out a reaction to Ryokuryuu wanting to bed him.

“True, the lad is always complaining we stand out too much.” Zeno conceded. “But Zeno is surprised the little king actually noticed how Zeno referred to the others; most don’t.”

“Well, I think it’s because I know to pay attention.” Su-won said, meeting Zeno’s eyes in a way that conveyed that he knew the truth about Yona.

Zeno didn’t react outwardly. “Is that her plan? How she’ll draw support to her?” Su-won asked.

“The Miss will draw support by being herself.” Zeno countered. “When all is said and done, Hiryuu is still human.” Su-won started, not actually expecting Zeno to voice it. “It is the all too human powers of compassion and charisma that draw people to her.”

“Then…what are the Dragon Warriors for?” Su-won asked.

Zeno’s answering smile seemed to make him gain decades. “We are the monsters that guard the way. After all, we only exist to protect Hiryuu, for our power is not meant for this world. What we are for…is to protect a teenaged dragon god too restless and impatient to stay in Heaven.”

Zeno patted Su-won on the head. “Just stick to your plans Little King. In the end, the Dragon Warriors don’t matter.”

“You matter to Yona.” Su-won countered, utterly sure in his statement.

“And that, is why we will always follow her. Beyond the blood vow, beyond the will of gods.” Then, before Su-won quite realized it was happening, Zeno was gone.
He did a slow inspection of the walls, trying to figure out just how Zeno got in and out, but had to concede defeat. Pulling out Yona’s book of memories and his translation, he stared at them for a long moment before deciding that he had had enough of dragons and gods and ancient memories for the day. Tucking them away, he turned to the stack Zeno had left behind, and began the task of examining the contents.

But his attention refused to stay on the task at hand. With a sigh that didn’t betray his excitement to read the next part, he picked up where he had left off.

The actual wedding ceremony ended up being two weeks later. Wisely, he just followed directions about what he was to do and what had to happen.

Ha-kun, while stunning in the red and gold wedding robes, seemed stiff in them, like she wasn’t used to the ornateness. Or she was nervous about ‘later’; he didn’t know her well enough to say for sure.

After a whirlwind of rites and blessings and a feast that neither of them actually got to eat, they were alone in his bed chamber, staring at his bed because it was better than staring at each other. “Ahh… is it required for us to…?” He cautiously asked.

“It’s not required tonight, but it does have to happen in the first year.” She replied. “Why, are you concerned for your performance?” There seemed to be an edge in her voice.

“I would like to at least have a proper conversation with you first. We’ve hardly had a chance to speak to each other. It’s not…” He trailed off, shrugging.

With that, she turned to the door. “Where are you going?” He asked, a little confused.

She paused, and it was her turn to seem confused. “…to my bed chamber?”

He blinked. “You’re supposed to have a separate one?”

She stared at him like he was some new weird being. “You do realize that at our rank, sharing a bed for more than marital relations is not a common or expected thing.”

“Oh.” He remarked, feeling awkward. “My parents always slept together, from what I remember, so I didn’t realize…” He focused on one of the characters on the quilt, one that meant ‘loyalty’. “…I’ll let you get out of that…” He didn’t quite run into the connecting room, but he still moved quickly.

Thankfully, he had gone into his wardrobe, so he was able to change into a night robe as well. “I’m changed.” She called after several minutes.

He poked his head out. She was settled in the bed, so grabbing the spare futon, he came out. “What are you doing?” She asked with furrowed brow.

He felt a bit flat footed. “…getting out a futon for myself? I mean, it’s my fault I didn’t realize you’re supposed to have your own bed chamber, so it wouldn’t be right to have you sleep in the futon—“

“Ohryuu.” He jumped when she said his name, and it hit him that he was rambling. “Get in the bed.” She ordered.

“Right.” Thankfully, the bed was big enough for there to be a respectable distance between them.

He was trying to count in his head, trying to relax, when he realized that someone (likely Guen) had placed his old stuffed dragon at the head of the bed. Unfortunately, he realized it at the same time
she noticed it. “A stuffed dragon?” She asked, picking it up.

“Damnit Guen…” He groaned, hiding his face in his pillow so he didn’t have to see her reaction.

There was only silence, and after several minutes, he peeked out. She had returned his stuffed dragon to its spot, and rolled over.

He rolled over himself, and closed his eyes.

As Hiryuu slowly woke up, he realized he was hugging on something. Whatever it was, it was smaller than him, and squishy. Even with how squishy it was, it had enough mass and density to it for there to be delicious pressure on his groin, in a way that he hadn’t realized was very pleasurable before.

The thing in his arms groaned, and his eyes flew open, and he stared dumbfounded at his new wife. When he went to sleep, they had been on opposite sides of the bed. During the night, they had moved towards each other, and ended up cuddling. Her back was to him, and the thing creating that wonderful pressure on his groin was her ass.

His face burned, and he just knew his dragon self was laughing its head off. One of his arms was pinned beneath her, and not wanting to disturb her, he did his best to move his hips back.

Doing this rolled both of them slightly onto their backs, and Ha-kun’s head was pillowed on his upper arm. She seemed strikingly young, and it hit him that he was seeing her without her defensive masks and tension. This close, he could see faint freckles across the bridge of her nose, and his eyes were drawn to her lips, and he understood finally what the poets meant by a ‘rosebud’ mouth.

Yanking his eyes away was a mistake, because he was then looking down her body, and into the gaping neck of the night robe, framing her breasts perfectly.

He swallowed hard, and closed his eyes. He hoped she woke up soon, so he could go ambush Guen or Shuten and find out why he had this urge to trace the neckline of the night robe and find out if the skin of her breasts was as soft as it felt.

Su-won had to stop, bizarrely aroused by this chaste and mundane description. Tidying up quickly, he retreated to his own bed, and did his best to think about battle plans.

His dreams, however, were filled with battle plans of a very different sort.

Chapter End Notes

I know more than likely someone who works in the castle would have made sure Ha-kun’s suite of rooms was fully set up, but this was a scene bouncing around in my head for a while, and a great chance for Ha-kun to start realizing how Hiryuu isn’t like other people.

Zeno, this time, while he got into the castle proper through the secret passages, entered Su-won’s room by ‘ghosting’. Since when he touches Kaya or any of the Monkeys he actually shifted into the spirit plane, he can use that to move unseen. Naturally, in Hiryuu Castle, he doesn’t need to touch one of them to ‘shift’.
“That girl with Lili-sama was right; those guys with the Raiju were like something out of the birth myth!” Lili overheard one soldier gush to another as she, Ayura, and Tetora left the garrison.

Hearing that threatened to send her back into her funk over Yona and her guys leaving Water tomorrow. Gritting her teeth, Lili stalked to the market. If Yona wasn’t coming back for the foreseeable future, then she’d fund a feast to remember, full of the best seafood the market had to offer.

Somehow, Ayura and Tetora held their tongues until the three of them had armfuls of bundles of seafood. “Did Yona-chan jilt you?” Tetora asked, teasingly.

“No way! She and her guys are leaving Water tomorrow, that’s all.” Lili protested.

“So you were jilted.” Ayura said bluntly.

“We’ve already exchanged good-byes; I just can’t let them leave without seeing more of the good things Water has, after all that darkness.” Lili countered, before changing the subject. “Should you be up doing all this activity Tetora?”

“Yun-kun’s salve is something else; the stab healed in half the time! The doctors in the castle were amazed.” Tetora gushed. “They’re hoping I might coax something out of him about its ingredients.”

“There’s more seafood here than what was in Yun’s Pirates’ Bounty stew in Awa!” Yona exclaimed, amazed.

“Seafood is the Water’s specialty after all.” Lili reminded her, after sending Jaeha off to buy the staple Kashou sauce, made from ginger flower essence.

“We should make the specialty boiled gyoza soup too.” Ayura suggested, already setting things up to make it.

“TEACH ME!!” Yun yelled.

Before anyone knew it, the feast was ready for consumption. Zeno and Shin-ah were having an impromptu eating contest, Ao shamelessly filching from their bowls. Jaeha was half a step away from forcing the clams Kija was eyeing warily down his throat, while Yun wept at how good everything was. “I’d never thought I’d taste food so effortlessly delicious like this…!” He wept between bites.

“…just what have you all been eating?” Lili asked, a little disturbed at imagining the group’s usual eating habits.

“You okay Lili?” Yona asked as she walked over, sitting down next to her.

“I’ve never had clams and crab so…casually, like this, before.” Lili said, considering the flavor. “I’m used to things expertly prepared and seasoned.”

“Don’t let Yun hear you say; he’s very proud of his skills.” Yona warned. “But it’s good, right? Plus
I think eating outside like this makes it taste better. Not to mention the company."

“That is such a you thing to say.” And I can practically hear Wo-King Su-won saying something similar...but I don’t want to mention him in earshot of Hak. Lili reflected, still full of questions she wanted to ask, but there was nothing she could ask in front of the group.

Yona giggled. “You say the funniest things Lili.”

“What about that was funny?!” Lili grumbled.

Meanwhile Tetora approached Hak with a bottle of wine. “Hak-sama, would you like a cup?”

He quietly let her pour him a cup. “Are the oysters to your liking?” She asked.

He eyed her suspiciously. “…you do remember I’m engaged, right? I don’t come alone.”

After the words left his mouth, he realized the unintentional innuendo and flushed a little. Tetora demurely covered her mouth, hiding her nosebleed. She HAD forgotten that fact.

Yona, overhearing the exchange, couldn’t contain her smirk, even as she felt her ears start burning.

“Still, your blade is familiar. Oh, where did I see it before?” Tetora tapped her lip in mock thought. “I think…it was the fighting tournament during the reign of the late King Il. Ayura and I both saw the one who was called the Raiju.”

“So the two of you guard the daughter of the Water General.” Hak said bluntly.

“Oh dear, we’ve been found out.”

“If you’ve figured out who I am, then you know who Hime-san is. She is sharper than anyone expected.” Hak pointed out. “Besides, the soldiers who never have become involved without the Water’s Golden Seal. And we’re ‘dead’, after all.”

Before Tetora could say anything, drops of water began falling from the sky.

“SAVE THE FOOD! DEFEND IT TO THE DEATH!!!” Yun yelled, as everyone raced to get the feast and themselves under cover.

It ended up with Lili and Yona in the smaller tent, and everyone else in the larger tent. “I forgot just how much rain the Water Tribe gets.” Yona complained.

“This is nothing; in the rainy season it rains every day.” Lili brushed off the sudden rainstorm, as water began leaking in. “The tent’s leaking.”

“Yeah, that happens.” Yona said, making sure the bedding was out from under the drip.

“How can you stand it? Leaking tents, the hard ground…” Lili marveled. I mean, this is the Crown Princess! How can she just…deal with all of this?!

“You get used to it. At least I have a tent, and something to sleep on. When you don’t have a choice, it’s a little amazing, how fast you can get used to something.” Yona answered with a faint, wistful smile.

For some reason, this reminded Lili of what Yona had said a few days ago. “Hey…” She started, pausing to find words. “Back then, what you told Won, King Su-won, I mean...about…” You said
The expression on Yona’s face was heartbreak and grief and anger, even as she turned her head. “Lightning flashed, outlining their forms, and then Father’s body hit the floor in front of me, and he entered the light…it was so much like how him-me’s father was killed, I wanted to think it wasn’t real. But it was—it is real.”

“…Hiryuu-ou lost his father the same way?” Lili asked tentatively.

“After he descended, and took the form of a three month old baby, he was found by the queen of the original Kouka. She was childless, having lost her only live child a few months earlier. The king, he was her soulmate, and he couldn’t hurt her, by doing with another what he couldn’t achieve with her. They were smart, figuring out who him-me had been. Past-mother…she was killed in much the same way as Mother was in this life, just like Father. The difference, this time, is I think Su-won…I want to hope that…not all of it was a lie, everything we shared. Zheng, the one who killed past-father…he said that he had always hated m-him-me. Him-me was able to fight him, and kill him, securing his claim.” Yona seemed on the edge of rambling, but Lili didn’t cut in.

“Why didn’t you say anything, right after?” Lili asked.

“I had no support. The only Tribe who would support me was Wind, and the only water source for Fuuga is a river flowing out of Fire. They dammed it, to secure Su-won’s ascension. Even if I hadn’t fled for my life, I don’t think I had much of a chance. The son of the ‘great war hero Prince Yuhon’ versus the childish daughter of ‘the foolish King Il’?” Yona shook her head. “That’s part of why I’m traveling, beyond helping the kingdom and seeing places. If I can get enough support, to where the only way to keep the Tribes united was to cede the throne to me…the last thing we need is civil war. We’re vulnerable enough as things stand.”

“Because of Nadai and southern Kai?”

“Not just them. Kan Su-jin conspired with Li Hazara of the Sen Province in northern Kai, so while he was ejected once, we can’t rule out another attempt. Sei…the last thing I recall hearing is the king’s mother dying, so his uncles are competing with each other. And there’s been nothing out of Xing since the last war, so we have no way of knowing if they’re a threat or not. Arguably, Su-won has overcome the biggest hurdles, with Kan Su-jin dead and gaining the loyalty of General Guen-Tae.” Yona explained.

“Xing could well be as big a potential threat as Kai, north and south.” Lili only just contained her yell as a ghost came into view after speaking.

He was dressed well, like a noble, and, most unusually, his hair was sky blue, with striking golden eyes.

“We have enough problems without borrowing trouble.” Yona chided. “Right…Abi and the others weren’t at the hot spring, and we haven’t really been alone until now.” She realized, taking in Lili’s dumbfounded stare. “This is Abi, the first Seiryuu and founder of the Water Tribe.”

“You need to work on following people if you plan on making a habit of it.” Abi told Lili with a frown.

Yona poked Lili, who wasn’t reacting. “…I’m actually meeting the founder of my Tribe…” She said, dazed.

“At least those tacky paperweights ended up being useful after all.” Abi said with a sigh.
“It wasn’t his idea for them to look like that.” Yona reminded him.

“‘Paperweight?’” Lili questioned with a blink. “You mean the Golden Water Seal?”

Abi and Yona nodded. “It was originally a paperweight, part of a set shared between him-me and his
dragons. But Abi has a love-hate relationship with Shuten, the first Ryokuryuu, and since getting
paralyzed every time he glared at him was too inconvenient, he’d throw things. You lost…three seals
that way before you just had the underside carved into your seal?” Yona directed the last part at Abi.

“Four.”

“P-paperweight?!” Lili stuttered out.

“As part of a peace treaty with the original Xing kingdom, him-me received a set of five
paperweights, identical save for the color of the glass orb. So he gave his dragon warriors the color
that matched their dragon. I know the Ryokuryuu one was destroyed, along with the Ouryuu one.
The Hiryuu one I’ve seen in the shrine room in Hiryuu Castle, and I don’t know what happened to
the Hakuryuu one.” Yona elaborated.

Lili could feel her brain shut down. The sacred symbol and embodiment of the authority of the Water
General being something as mundane as a paperweight…

“So I know Tetora seems to like Hak, but which one of my dragons do you like?” Yona asked as
Abi faded away, drawing Lili out of her stupor.

“Huh? Oh, a man to me has to be at least thirty five, So since none of your guys are that old…” Lili
trailed off with a shrug, not noticing Yona biting the inside of her mouth to keep from laughing.

“Well if you wait ten years, Jaeha will be old enough for you. But why thirty five?” Yona asked,
curious.

Lili was slowly turning red. “…because that’s how old General Guen-tae was when I met him the
first time…” She managed to get out.

“There is something fierce and wild about him that’s appealing…” Yona admitted. “But the age gap
is a bit much for me. As a fighter, I have to worry about Hak being killed in battle. I would hate to
live with the knowledge that I would likely outlive him. Not after him-me left Ha-kun so early.” She
continued.

“What do you mean?” Lili asked, leaning in and ignoring the water dripping on her head.

“Him-me was eight years older than Ha-kun. They married when he was twenty eight and she was
twenty. Their son was born the next year, and him-me died when he was thirty nine. Ha-kun…she
lived into her eighties, seeing her great grandson become a man.” Yona started blinking fiercely. “I
know it would be fair, if I wound up a widow for the same amount of time, but I hate thinking about
spending a day or two without Hak, I could never…”

Lili found herself blown away. I…never thought about that; outliving my husband. Maybe it’s
because of my own history, but it always seemed more likely that I would die in childbirth, leaving
my husband alone like Mother did Father. One day, I hope I fall in love with someone as deeply as
Yona loves Hak, where I would reincarnate just to be with him again, regardless of gender… She
thought, letting Yona calm herself. “Even with Hiyou gone, there’s still a lot to do, setting up
clinics.” She said out loud after a few minutes.

“True; Hiyou was the stem, you still have to dig out the roots.” Yona remarked.
“I can set up a couple on my own, but for a Tribe-wide system, I need Father’s cooperation. But he doesn’t listen to me about anything complicated. With how he hasn’t acted to fight Nadai, I wonder why he was named General.” Lili complained before catching herself. *I really shouldn’t be complaining to someone who watched her own father be murdered by someone she trusted!* She scolded herself silently.

“We never really know, what fathers think of their daughters.” Yona noted with a sad half smile. “But, you need to be his ally Lili, and be on his side, if he needs someone in his corner. You know they called Father a coward? Because he freely gave land away and didn’t oppose the Generals. But, it takes more strength to stand by your beliefs, no matter how many voices are screaming at you to do otherwise. So, even if you don’t understand him, never leave him alone.”

A slightly uneasy silence fell over the girls as they turned to their neglected food. “Hey…” Lili said after several minutes. “…you knew I’m the daughter of the Water General, even though I didn’t say anything. Is it…really safe to meet like this? I mean…” I suppose it doesn’t matter now, since King Su-won saw her and Hak. But, if he was after them, why haven’t royal troops shown up?

Yona was quiet for a moment. “I ran into Su-won in Awa in Earth, when he came to investigate Yan Kum-ji. And he saw me and the others, when we were fighting in the battle where Kan Su-jin was killed. Like I said, I’d like to hope that he doesn’t really want me dead. But I’ve had Abi and the spirits of the other first generation Dragon Warriors check, in Hiryuu Castle. He’s released no official decree about me and Hak. Even the rumor, saying I was kidnapped and killed by Hak, is just that; rumor. I’m his heir by default, unless he marries and has a child, but he…I don’t see that happening. As there’s been no decree relating to it, I can’t be arrested, nor can Hak or the others, legally speaking. So unless he confirms the errant rumor that Hak and I are responsible for Father’s murder —“

“WHAT?!?!?!?” Lili screamed. “WHO WOULD THINK THAT?!?!?!”

Miraculously, none of Yona’s dragons, or Lili’s attendants, came rushing in, alarmed by the scream. “I heard it in a market near Kuuto. I’m not sure the source, but I think Su-won’s advisor Kei-shuk is behind that one. But that might be my paranoia talking, since I’ve never trusted him. Still, my spirits have reported that he’s been trying to get Su-won to discredit sightings of me, and pronounce me dead. As I was saying, unless Su-won decides to give royal weight to that rumor, THEY would be the ones committing a crime, by denying me and mine our liberty.” Yona explained. "They can't touch anyone I come in contact with either, unless we were engaged in illegal activity. So it's safe to meet up."

"...Let me know, if you need to cry or scream or just take a break from all the guys," Lili told her, eyes watering. "I owe you so much! If you ever need me for anything, call me and I'll come flying! Next time, I'll protect you, even if it's with my body. Just--don't forget me!" She pleaded, half a step from full-out sobbing.

"Silly, why would I forget a comrade?" Yona assured her with a smile, making Lili start sobbing, much to her embarrassment.

“So when His Majesty attacks Southern Kai, you’ll be looking for the people Kum-ji sold?” Gi-gan repeated as she met with General Guen-Tae, who had escorted his wife to Awa on his way to link up with troops at the border.

He nodded. “Hopefully we’ll be able to learn something about their fates. The slave trade is legal in Kai, but since they’re citizens of another country, no one is sure how complete any records would be.”
“Still, even if it’s word of their death, any news of their loved ones would be a comfort.” She noted, blowing out a trail of smoke.

There was a knock on the door. “Come.” Gi-gan ordered.

A young man with green hair entered, only to have three knives lodge in the door next to his head once the door was closed. “Is that how you want to greet your favorite crew member Captain?” He asked with a smile.

“Who said you were my favorite? Snot nosed brat.” Gi-gan snorted. “Just how many blows to the head have you taken if you think that?”

“So cruel.” The man lamented. “Especially when we stopped by to see how things have turned out.”

“Oh?” Gi-gan raised an eyebrow. “Where are you lot staying then?”

“We’re camped on the edge—“

“Hell no. The town will string us all up if they hear their hero was staying in a tent.” Gi-gan cut him off. “You all will stay here with me.”

“Aye aye Captain.” The man conceded, knowing better than to argue the point. “She wanted to see Awa with its real smiles first, so we’ll see you later today.”

After the man withdrew, Guen-Tae turned to Gi-gan with a raised eyebrow. “He was my problem child crew member. He makes a far better pirate than a fisherman, unlike the others, so he went off to find more trouble, once Kum-ji ‘vanished’.” Gi-gan replied in response to the unanswered question.

Something about him seems familiar for some reason…

With a mental shrug, Guen-Tae redirected the meeting back to what they hoped to find in Southern Kai about the people Kum-ji sold.

“Lina!” Yuri called as she ran over to Yona, Hak, and Zeno. “You’re back!”

“I wanted to see what the real Awa looked like, with its real smiles, now that Kum-ji’s been gone for a while now.” Yona explained with a smile. It was a little jarring to hear her old alias, but she hadn’t been about to use her real name when Kum-ji raised the question of her being ‘Yona-hime’. “Plus I wanted to let Captain Gi-gan know about the drug Kum-ji had been buying from Kai, with the money he earned.”

“Drug?” Yuri asked with a blink. “Is it the one he was selling to Water? I thought it was opium.”

Yona shook her head sadly. “It’s called Nadai, and it’s very dangerous. In Water, the dealers would mix it into wine and incense, and sell it in the teahouses. The person starts off feeling great pleasure, but then it turns into immense pain. It numbs them, so they could lose an arm or a leg and not realize it, dying from the blood loss. You can tell who an addict is by the nails and teeth, since it discolors and rots them.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised to hear that Kum-ji was involved with a drug as foul as he was. I’ll spread the word to the girls, and keep an eye out for the signs you said.” Yuri promised. “Have you heard of Yun-ho tea? The Earth General’s wife makes it, and it’s been really popular in Kai. She’s pretty much given Awa a monopoly on its export.”

“I’ve heard of the tea, but I didn’t hear about the monopoly.” Yona said.
“OH YOUR HAIR’S SO CUTE!!!” A woman who didn’t look much older than herself squealed, practically having hearts in her eyes.

“Really?!” Yona asked eagerly.

“I love how cute the length is!” The woman continued.

“The only trouble is that it frizzes with any hint of rain in the air, so then I look more like a red pompom.” Yona complained. “The frizz isn’t as bad when it’s longer, but it never cooperates no matter how long or short it is.”

“I didn’t realize you were back in town, Yun-ho-sama. This is the maker of Yun-ho tea.” Yuri introduced the woman to the group.

Chapter End Notes

Raise your hand if you’re surprised a rumor of Yona and Hak being responsible for Il’s murder hasn’t come up in canon. For real people, I’m doing a tally. Because I can see Kei-shuk doing something like that, as I imply he’s done here.
Yun-ho spied Yuri talking to a girl in a cloak as she left her most recent meeting with the merchants about the tea sales. She was with a tall, dark-haired man carrying a polearm with a wrapped blade, and a blond boy dressed in orange.

**Yuri had been her best source of information about the savior of Awa, the crimson-haired girl.**

“It’s still hard to believe that the pirates were fighting for us the whole time, let alone that people from outside Awa, untouched by Kum-ji, would care enough to help.” She had said over red bean soup and mochi. “But that girl is something else!”

“How so?”

“I caught a glimpse of her face, when Kum-ji had grabbed her by her hair. If looks could kill…”

Yuri shivered slightly at the memory. “It was almost like there was fire in her eyes. And…she was the one who killed Kum-ji.”

“Really?” Yun-ho questioned.

Yuri nodded. “The pirate called ‘the soaring dragon’ had gone after Kum-ji, as he was escaping in a small boat. But Kum-ji clipped his shoulder with an arrow. She had seen him escaping, so she had grabbed a bow herself. The best way to describe the scene, when she killed him…it’s a bizarre way to describe it, but it was like a dragon of fire shot out from the bow, consuming Kum-ji. It was terrifying and gorgeous at the same time, as the sun rose, painting her in the blush of dawn…”

“I wish I could have seen that; it sounds amazing.” Yun-ho said, half a step shy of a whine. “Did you learn her name?”

“She called herself Lina. The pretty boy who dressed as a girl and snuck in with her was named Yun.”

Back in the present, Yun-ho spied crimson hair beneath the hood of the cloak, as the girl shifted position enough for Yun-ho to see her face.

“OH YOUR HAIR’S SO CUTE!” She squealed, entering the conversation in the least suspicious way she knew.

Plus, it was true.

“Really?!” The girl’s wisteria-colored eyes sparkled as she waited for confirmation.

“I love how cute the length is!” Yun-ho assured her, making her smile, even as the sparkle in her eyes dimmed and she fingered a lock. “The only trouble is that it frizzes with any hint of rain in the air, so then I look like a red pompom. The frizz isn’t as bad when it’s longer, but it never cooperates no matter how long or short it is.”

Yun-ho bite back a laugh as she pictured the girl with a red pompom on her head. “I didn’t realize you were back in town, Yun-ho-sama. This is the maker of Yun-ho tea.” Yuri introduced the woman to the group. “This is Lina, and…I don’t think I got your names last time.” She told Hak and Zeno
apologetically.

“Hak.”

“Zeno wasn’t here then, he joined after for the lad’s food!”

So this is ‘Lina’. “Guen-tae-kun came with me! He has to do something along the border, involving the people Kum-ji had sold, so he came with me so he could let Captain Gi-gan know.” Yun-ho said.

“That’s great news!” Yuri exclaimed. ‘Lina’, while appearing to share Yuri’s excitement, had a sense of wariness in her eyes. “I need to go tell the girls about that, and what you told me Lina. Will you still be here tomorrow?”

‘Lina’ nodded. “See you tomorrow.” She confirmed.

“So much for a quiet visit.” Hak complained as Yuri ran off. “Nothing travels faster than gossip.”

“So, Li Yun-ho,” Awa’s savior began. “Just what are your husband and Su-won doing along border?”

“Well, Lina-sama,” Yun-ho replied, hinting at what she knew, as there was only one person who could refer to Su-won-sama so casually. “What I said he was doing is completely true.”

“But not the whole truth.” ‘Lina’ noted. “I suppose you’re staying with Captain Gi-gan? I had heard that she was appointed to be Awa’s lord, since no one else can handle her influence…”

Yun-ho smiled. “Would you and your companions care to join me at my lodgings and try my tea?”

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Hak and Zeno, with the experience of ‘married’ men, left the pair to their tea, after letting Captain Gi-gan know of their presence. As she was the one to make the invitation, Yun-ho performed the ceremony. “No wonder Kai is going crazy over this tea; you have created a perfect floral scent, that calls to mind whatever flower the consumer thinks of.” Yona praised after a moment’s contemplation.

“I’m afraid I must claim success by pure chance.” Yun-ho demurred. “While my lord husband derides the scent as unappealing, he is still grateful for the esteem it brings to his house.”

Each made the mistake of meeting the other’s eyes, and a heartbeat later both burst out laughing.

“Let’s stop with the formalities, since we are cousins through Mother.” Yona suggested through her giggles.

Yun-ho somehow stifled her own giggles. “True enough. Although I must confess some surprise; I wasn’t aware you knew of it.”

“Mother told me some, but for other parts…let’s just say I have sources that can pass unseen.” Yona admitted. “Then again, the Kashi clan knows its own.” She added, flicking her eyes to Yun-ho’s dress above her sash, and the hint of a dagger handle barely visible.

“I love my husband, but he hasn’t realized I’m usually armed, even after years of marriage. So, you’ve come to see the fruits of your efforts, Yona-san?” Yun-ho asked, choosing a middling form of address, as Yona had acknowledged the family tie.

Yona shook her head. “Awa was freed through the efforts of those who fought so hard and so long for it. It can be said I hardly did anything.”
Yun-ho raised an eyebrow. “So ensuring another ship of girls wasn’t sold, and killing Kum-ji yourself is ‘hardly anything’?”

Yona shrugged. “Still…why should my contribution stand above the others?”

“You’re a symbol. The people of Awa may have known the pirates only attacked Kum-ji, but it seemed impossible, to openly challenge him, let alone to win…Yuri was very impressed by the look in your eyes, when he had grabbed you by the hair, as well as the moment you killed him, and she’s not alone in that. Dawn came after the dark night that was Kum-ji’s oppression. So it’s not so much what you did as what you stand for” Yun-ho said passionately, trying to convey some of the feeling she had gotten off of Yuri and some of the other girls who had been in the room and on the ship that night.

“Hmm…” Yona hummed in acknowledgement.

“Su-won-sama has gained Guen-tae-kun’s respect and loyalty, so if you’re trying for an active coup…” Yun-ho changed the subject, trailing off suggestively at the end.

“One coup this century is enough I think.” Yona decided dryly. “My biggest problem is support. If I can gain enough support throughout all the Tribes, to where they could only stay united if he ceded the throne to me…but in the end, as long as I can help the people of Kouka, and bring to life, in some small way, the Kouka Father always talked of…” Licking her lips, she continued. “True, I’ve been telling people I’m seeking support so Su-won will abdicate to me, but…as long as it was him, I could give it up. The throne, I mean.”

This wasn’t something she had voiced to anyone before now. Somehow, she felt safer tentatively voicing this to an outsider.

“Guen-tae-kun has deliberately not been thinking too hard, about what exactly happened.” Yun-ho noted. “But given the circumstances, he knows what the answer is, even if he doesn’t acknowledge it. It was a terrible deed, but the one behind it, is not a terrible person.”

Yona simply nodded.

“So what can I, as one Kashi clanswoman to another, do to help you?” Yun-ho asked.

“…how strong is belief in the birth myth, in Earth?” Yona asked. “You’ve heard the rumors floating about, about how Hiryyuu-ou returned to strike down Kan Su-jin for trying to seize the throne? If I presented the Dragon Warriors to them, what would the response be?”

Yun-ho sighed. “Belief in the birth myth is fairly strong, if not as strong as in Fire. But stronger than that is regard for Guen-tae-kun. Win him over, and the majority would follow.”

Yona grinned impishly, as an idea crossed her mind. “And how eager would your husband be to fight the current Hakuryuu, successor to the founder of the Earth Tribe?”

Yun-ho, catching the idea, returned the grin.

Guen-tae turned a corner into one of the main hallways between the guest rooms and main areas of the lord of Awa’s mansion and blinked.

Yona-hime, with Son Hak and several other people, blinked back.

“Yona-hime-sama.” Guen-tae greeted politely, taking in the shorter hair, plain clothes, and now
callused hands. “I see rumors of your demise have been exaggerated.”

“To be fair, Hak and I should have been killed, falling off that cliff.” The ‘missing’ princess answered, calm despite how everyone behind her was tense. “Will we be seeing you at dinner?”

“Will you be there to be seen?” He countered.

“Even if you sent a rider to the castle right now, it would take three days minimum for a round trip. We would be long gone. And I have raised enough curiosity in you that you would want satisfied before reporting me.” She replied as she and her group continued past him. “And, most important of all… I’ve met your wife already.”

At dinner, the princess was busy chattering with his wife, the captain occasionally adding a dry, cutting remark.

Guen-Tae sensibly stuck by the unusual group she was travelling with. In addition to Hak, there was a pretty youth Guen-Tae tentatively decided was a boy, a cheerful blond boy who was annoying familiar, a masked swordsman who looked like a demon from a mask play, the green-haired man the captain had greeted with throwing knives, and a man who was damn near close to being a ghost, with all the white he was in.

Not to mention the squirrel swiping from everyone’s plate, that naturally sent his wife into squeals of cuteness.

It was the man in white who commanded Guen-Tae’s attention. In addition to the white clothes, his hair was white (despite his apparent age), and his right hand…

It was covered in white scales with white claws in place of fingernails.

“Were you all the ‘bandits’ caught up in fighting the Sen Province troops?” Guen-Tae asked, wanting something to distract him from the bits he was hearing of the women’s conversation. It seemed to be a discussion of how cute all the men were.

“Hime-sama wasn’t about to stand by watching with such a clear danger threatening Kouka.” The white man stated, reaching for his cup of tea.

He blinked as the scent of his wife’s stinky tea. “This smell…it reminds me of mountain lilies.”

“It’s my wife’s tea. For some reason everyone’s been crazy about it, especially Kai.” Guen-Tae informed him as the rest of the princess’s men smelled it.

“The scent’s making Zeno hungry!”

“Everything makes you hungrier.” The boy said. “But this does smell nice. Wonder if she’s noticed any medical properties…?“

The masked man rescued the squirrel from drowning in his cup as Guen-Tae turned back to his food. It seems like the princess’s men fell on the side of those who actually liked the scent, though he was gratified when Hak, at least, seemed to wrinkle his nose every time he took a sip.

Afterwards, while it wasn’t a specific request, the princess did make it known that she’d be on the veranda. Guen-Tae joined her. “My condolences for His Late Majesty’s death. No matter my personal feelings about him and his policies, he was still my King.” He opened. He might not have
cared much for Il as King, but as a person he was decent enough, with a great sense of humor.

“Thank you for your kind words, but I know the number of people who genuinely mourn Father can be counted on one hand, with fingers to spare.” She replied, her eyes sad while the rest of her face was neutral. “Su-won will be invading Southern Kai soon.”

It felt more like a statement of fact than a question. “What are your plans?” He inquired.

“For now, see my kingdom and help everyone I can. One day, I’ll return for what is mine.” She stated, with utter confidence in her statement.

“I’ve sworn my loyalty to Su-won-sama.”

“I know.”

“I will not break that.” He reminded her, even though everyone knew that Earth’s loyalty was not easily gained, or easily broken.

“I’m not asking you to. All I request of you, is your vote, when the time comes.” She had a serious look in her eyes.

“Oh?”

“Su-won knows I’m alive.” Guen-Tae found himself a little surprised at this, despite himself. “As he has no inclination for marriage, I am his heir. He was still approved by the Five Generals, and he is working to improve the kingdom. If I can get popular support with me, and secure at least three votes…” She left the sentence hanging in the air.

“If things do turn out like you want, what would I get out of this?” He had to ask. “True, you’re not asking me to betray my liege…”

Yona-hime rose with the grace of a dancer, and he followed her to where her men were gathered in the courtyard, doing various things. “Kija?”

“Yes, Hime-sama?” The white man, Kija, asked as he walked over, the others not even trying to hide their interest.

“General Li Guen-Tae of Earth, this is Kija, the ninety…eighth? Hakuryuu, successor to the founder of the Earth Tribe.”

“Bullshit.” The curse was out of his mouth before he could stop it, as rude as it was. He’d concede that the original Dragon Warriors were probably real enough in some fashion, but without any hint of them in the time then...

“Why does everyone seem to dismiss the idea?” Kija complained, with a…pout? “Is it really impossible to believe?”

“Unlike your village, so much has been lost from those times that the few tales that survive are taken as myths. And with no other apparent supernatural or divine intervention…” Yona-hime shrugged. “What would convince you?” She asked Guen-Tae, unfazed by his curse word.

“Should I really believe that the Dragon Warriors, after leaving the castle after Hiryuu-ou’s death, had families that survived to this day?” Guen-Tae questioned, a little dubious.

“When his youngest son was born with white hair and a scaled arm, the first Hakuryuu realized that
one day, Hiruyu-ou-sama, who he had known and guarded during his time on Earth, would return one day. The power would be passed down, generation to generation, until Hiruyu-ou-sama returned for his Right Arm.” Kija said passionately. “That time has come, and the Dragon Warriors stand together once again, to defend Kouka and Hiruyu-ou-sama.”

“Regardless of whether or not you believe, I doubt you would turn down the chance to face a Dragon Warrior in combat, and who better than the current Hakuryuu?” For some reason, Guen-Tae was aware of the fire that burned in the princess’s eyes. “You do believe.” He remarked quietly.

“I don’t believe. I know.” She seemed more a hardened fighter than a sixteen year old girl. “What say you, General? Will you fight the successor of the founder of your Tribe? Or would you prefer to fight Hak, now that he’s a man? Or one of the other Dragon Warriors?” She suggested, casting a glance at those mentioned.

Now that she mentioned it, he’d love to fight the blond kid, as the suggestion of maybe fighting him increased that annoying sense of familiarity. Guen-Tae eyed the assembled, considering, for a few minutes. “I’ll fight Hakuryuu, on one condition.” He finally decided. “I have a chance to test your sword skills and Hak’s teaching ability myself.”

He locked eyes with Hak as he said his condition, almost daring him to say something. Hak’s face went through a range of expressions, but he held his tongue. “We have a deal then, General Guen-Tae.” Yona-hime agreed.

Somehow, her dragons held their tongues until Guen-Tae had left the courtyard. Then, everyone erupted, each trying to voice their opposition as loud as possible, even Shin-ah. She decided to just let them vent, but as the minutes passed and they showed no sign of stopping, she cast a pleading look to Zeno, who had stopped protested near the start and was just yelling for the hell of it.

Zeno obliged by letting out an earsplitting whistle, cutting through the din. “You can’t seriously be thinking about actually fighting General Guen-Tae?!?” Hak roared, determined to get the last word.

“You’re acting like he’s going to kill me. It’s a spar, just like how his fight with Kija will be.” Yona pointed out.

“Still, even with the senju herb, you were still seriously injured less than two weeks ago! It’s not outside the realm of possibility for you to cause further injury to yourself!” Yun exclaimed.

Everyone nodded in agreement. “Look, just because HE fought General Guen-Tae to earn his respect, doesn’t mean that YOU have to.” Hak pointed out.

“He’s also smart enough to value his life. His wife and I are cousins through Mother, so do you really think he’ll seriously injure me, or are all of you protesting because you can?” Yona asked, hands on her hips. “Now, I’m taking advantage of the Captain’s bath, and going to bed.”

She walked off to do just that, leaving her dragons to stare after her, open-mouthed. “Yun’s right, but how can we convince her of that?” Jaeha asked.

“Maybe we should show some trust in the Miss, that she knows what she’s doing.” Zeno suggested. “She’s trained hard with swords and bows, so we should return some of the faith she has in us, and have faith in her ability.”

He also walked away once he’d said his piece. “…Zeno’s right. We don’t have to like her decision, but we should support her in it.” Shin-ah piped up, before leaving himself.

Hak just chose to stalk away, leaving Yun, Kija, and Jaeha. “We can’t change her mind on this.”
Yun verbally conceded the point. “I get it’s as much politics as a chance to test her skills, but I’m still examining each inch of her wound once it’s over.”

Then it was just Kija and Jaeha. “Looks like we’re outvoted.” Jaeha noted with a sigh. “Just try not to kill him during your fight, if she goes first and he gets a lucky strike.” He told Kija.

With another sigh, he wandered off himself, to find some sake and Captain Gi-gan. He had to speak to her about the events in Water.

Now alone, Kija looked up at the moon, about half full. “Ancestors, please keep Hime-sama safe during her fight. And let my fight be enough to convince General Guen-Tae.” He prayed, fisting his dragon arm over his heart.

Chapter End Notes

See, told you I’d work in Yona’s mother’s canon name, Kashi. Only I’ve made it her clan name, not her personal name. Still on the fence about how far to take my Kashi clan, but for now, the relevant point is that Yona and Yun-ho are cousins through Cheonsa (my name for Yona’s mother). Cheonsa and Yun-ho are first cousins, so Yona and Yun-ho are first cousins once removed, being cross-generational, while any child Yun-ho has would be Yona’s second cousin. Given how related real-life nobility and royalty can get, it would be more surprising for Yona not to have some cousins in one or more of the Tribes that aren’t Su-won, if only through her mother and her family.

Survey agrees with me about how it’s surprising a rumor saying Yona and Hak killed Il hasn’t turned up in canon.

Yet another bit I’ve been sitting on for a while, Yona meeting Guen-Tae. So, the rest of the Awa visit, then we meet Kalgan and go to Kai, which means Zeno reveal!
“If you want to talk, then get over here with the liquor.” Gi-gan ordered, tired of Jaeha hovering just beyond the turn of the hallway, waffling.

She watched him approach and sit down out of the corner of her eye, with a bottle of wine and two cups. Something about his manner reminded her of the early days, of that tense, sharp-tongued kid uncertain of his welcome, yet determined to push the limits regardless.

Each pouring the other’s cup, she waited. It never did any good to rush him, or push him into talking.

“Did Yona-chan tell you, about Nadai and Hiyou?” He finally asked, after a cup and a half.

“Aye.” She said. “We should have sunk more of the drug running ships.”

“…did she tell you about the drug puppets he sent after her?” He asked, tiptoeing up to the issue.

“Aye.”

“…nothing phased them. The Nadai had dulled their senses so much, that anything that would stop a normal person…they just kept coming, and attacking.” He said fiddling with his cup and not drinking the contents. “There was three, that I’m sure about, and two that I…might have killed.” He finally admitted in a rush.

She held her cup out for a third round. Somehow, he managed not to spill any of it. True, he loved and cherished Yona, but Captain Gi-gan was the one he respected, and the closest thing to a mother he had ever known.

Tossing back her third cup, she spoke. “Ya know why I forbade you lot from killing, aside from not wanting the sin of murder on your souls?” She didn’t wait for an answer before she continued. “If I had given you all the leeway to kill Kum-ji’s men, I would have been no better than him. Life meant nothing to him. So many things can be undone, but a life taken can never be brought back. Letting you kill his men…they were not the enemy. They chose their side, but at the end of the day, they are still neighbors, former friends, and maybe even kin. The lot of you are far too tender-hearted to handle facing the gaps taking those lives would have created.”

She placed her cup on the veranda, considering the moon. “I am not someone worth killing for.” She murmured, nearly too low for him to hear. “When it comes down to it, when you’re alone, protecting someone precious to you…if there’s ever a time for killing to be right, it’s then. No one can demand that you kill for them. Just as you’re the only one who can choose who to die for, you are the only one who can choose who to kill for.”

Both were quiet for several minutes. “It was a little terrifying, how easy it was to kill for her, even with your teachings. And…I don’t think it was because of the dragon’s blood.” He finally confided.

“As long you don’t treat it casually, you’ll be fine.” Gi-gan said with a snort. “And make sure that girl knows you’re not bitter, over ‘having to kill for her’.”

Jaeha blinked at that. “Why would she think I’m bitter?”
“Why wouldn’t she?” She countered. “She had her way, she’d be the one making all the sacrifices.”

He made a face. “You’re right about that. She agreed to fight General Guen-Tae tomorrow, in addition to Kija fighting him. She shut down any attempts to try and change her mind.”

“As long as you leave the mansion standing. ‘Destroyed by idiots’ isn’t a valid excuse on a compensation claim to Kuuto.” She told him.

Reassured, Jaeha went to bed. Now he just had to have faith in Yona tomorrow…

Gi-gan eyed Jaeha’s empty cup. Picking up the bottle, she refilled it. “He’s definitely your descendant.” She told the presence who had taken Jaeha’s spot. “Worrying about what I think.”

At the edge of her hearing, she heard a man snort. “He’d be an idiot not to worry about what you think.” She thought she heard.

Picking up the bottle and the cups, she stood. “C’mon pole boy, help me undress.”

Walking away, she could picture an eager face, even as the mouth scowled at the nickname.

Hak was already huddled in the futon when Yona returned from her bath, feigning sleep. Once she got in, he rolled over and hugged her to him, like he was hiding her away from the world. “He won’t hurt me badly.” She reminded him.

“Excuse us for worrying, after what happened during your last real sword fight.” He retorted, a hand pressed flat against her back, and the fresh pink scar under her robe.

She pressed her hand against the scar crossing his torso, subtly reminding him that she too had reason to worry every time he fought.

The atmosphere in the shared tent was tense. While they had given up on staying on their half of the futon at the start of the night weeks ago, this night saw each huddled at the edges, backs to each other. She wasn’t about to apologize, for rushing off to kill the man who had murdered her father, and nearly killed her little brother, but she was beginning to regret a little, rushing off without telling anyone.

He had burst onto the fight as she dealt the final blow. She knew she hadn’t made any favorable impressions, covered in sweat and dirt and blood, but then the ground started moving, and then she was falling to her knees. She had lost track of her position in relation to the cliff edge, and as she tilted to the side, she suddenly realized she was falling over the edge.

She tried to catch herself on the edge, but then her husband had grabbed her hand. Through the fog of what she was realizing was poison-haze, she felt rain on her face, and she realized he was crying, yelling at her as he pulled her up. The Monkeys and Yun-mei joined him as she cleared the edge and she lost the fight to stay awake.

She had woken to a coldly worried Yun-mei checking her wounds, and was informed that she had been unconscious for two days. Now that she was conscious, the group could make real progress back to the castle. It was slower than she would have preferred, but Yun-mei was adamant that she wasn’t up to any speed faster than a trot, and Hiryuu had tersely agreed. She only slept that first night because of the tea Yun-mei had made her drink, and in the face of this tension, she was wishing Yun-mei had made her drink the tea again tonight.
There was a sigh behind her, and the rustle of cloth as Hiryuu sat up. Unable to bear the tense silence, she stiffly rolled over. “Whatever you’re going to do, just do it. But if it involves a thrashing, you’ll have to wait until I’m healed, or Yun-mei would thrash you.” She said, choosing to stare at the fabric above her head instead of looking at him.

He seemed to choke on something, and then his face filled her view. He looked…horrified? “Why the hell would I thrash you?!” He asked, and with a start she realized that he was genuinely horrified at the thought.

“It’s what’s done to insolent wives, you idiot.” The insult left her mouth before she realized it. “By all appearances, I’d run off on you, humiliating you.”

“There were dozens of people who saw you swear eternal fidelity, both in Fuuga and during the wedding rites. So why would anyone think you ran off on me? And why’d it be humiliating for you to run off on me? It would be more embarrassing if I didn’t chase after you and fight for you.”

Dear gods, he seriously didn’t get it? Gritting her teeth, she started sitting up, and to her surprise he helped her, essentially doing all the work. “So if I genuinely left you, that wouldn’t bother you?” She asked, incredulous.

“You’re too honorable to break your word like that.” He stated. “I would like to think you would say something if you did want to leave, but if you did leave for real, and I chased after you only to be told to leave, I would respect that. I wouldn’t deserve to claim any part of you if I didn’t fight for you.” It hit her that this was the closest their faces had been to each other, and it seemed like there was a faint fire burning behind his eyes.

Oh gods, he’s sincere?! “If I ran off for real, you’re supposed to chase after me, drag me back kicking and screaming if necessary, and thrash me so I wouldn’t do it again.” She told him slowly.

He was frowning. “But I didn’t think you ran off. I thought you’d been kidnapped, or Yeon had been kidnapped and you went to save him. Who was that man?”

“He killed Father, and nearly killed Yeon. He was really too young to fully remember it, but sometimes, he dreams of it. This was the first sign of him I’ve had of him since that night.” She replied. “Wait, you thought I might have been kidnapped? Why?”

“Your study was trashed, like there’d been a fight.” He said, and she flushed, remembering the rush she had been in, once the message sunk in and she couldn’t remember where she had hidden the dagger that killed Father. “…I was in a rush…”

“Well next time, please tell someone. I already lost both of my parents. I don’t want to lose you, or the dragons, or anyone, again.”

“That’s a fool’s wish.” She pointed out.

“Then I’ll be the fool. I’m already an idiot, so I’ll just add to the list.” He said. “Though I’m glad we hadn’t been in a fight to the death for real; I’d have been slaughtered!” He declared with a laugh.

She couldn’t help smiling a little, hearing his laugh. It was a shaft of sunlight suddenly peeking through heavy clouds of tension. On a whim, she grabbed one of his hands and laced their fingers together. He stared, wide-eyed, looking between their hands and her face, before a gorgeous smile filled his face.
The thing she was holding was squirming. “Lemme up.” It said.

That didn’t sound like a good idea, so she clung on tighter. “I have to pee.”

That penetrated the fog of sleep, and Hak groaned as he squinted his eyes open. Yona took advantage of his distraction to slip out, and he rubbed his eyes as she dealt with her business. That dream felt more real than the others, and it took a minute to process his surroundings and his body. His male body. “Are you alright?” She asked as she crawled back into bed and sprawled on top of him in a way that definitely affirmed his gender.

“I had another dream. She had gone after the man who killed her father without letting anyone know, and everything was tense the second night after she woke up after the fight.” He said. “…I think, his actions that night…it might have been when she started thinking that this might be more than what she had expected.”

“She looked like a goddess of battle, when him-me found her, dealing the killing blow. It was hard to believe he could ever pretend to possess someone as magnificent as her.” She said quietly.

His cheeks grew warm, and he couldn’t figure out why he was reacting to praise of his past self. “It took a minute, to process that I’m a guy, not a girl. Is that…?” He tentatively asked.

“It got easier, once I entered puberty, after I had dreams like to process the present. But I still had a sense of disconnect, a moment of ‘oh, that’s me’, when I looked into the mirror. At least before That Night.” She answered. “It’s been a while, since you’ve had one of these dreams, right?”

“Yeah…sometimes I’d wake up thinking about her, so I might have had other dreams. This was the first one in a while that really stuck with me when I woke up.” He agreed.

“We’ll have to get up for real, in a couple hours.” She noted, craning her neck to look outside. “…how worried are you, about my chances?”

He was quiet for a long moment. “Now that the knee-jerk reaction has passed…not that worried.”

Beaming, she snuggled back into his arms for a couple more hours of sleep.

The princess, Guen-Tae noted with amusement, appeared very well rested, while Hakuryuu Kija looked even more like a ghost than he had at dinner last night, as they gathered on the bluffs outside of town. “So, wood or steel?” He asked; as the challenged, she had the right to choose the weapon.

“Steel.” She answered without pause, sending a note of panic through her men.

The green haired man he had heard the princess call ‘Jaeha’ ambushed Hakuryuu Kija, sitting on his back and pinning his dragon arm with his foot. “Hakuryuu needs to fret less!” The blond boy chirped as he crouched by the pinned man’s head.

Meanwhile, Hak decided to play keep away with Yona-hime’s sword. “Hak, give it.” She growled, hopping up and down, the sword just out of her reach.

Smirking, he moved the sword to his other hand, and grabbed her wrist. Then he leaned down and she leaned up and—“Huh…that’s new…” Guen-Tae commented to himself, watching the pair kiss pretty passionately.

As the kiss ended, he whispered something in her ear that instantly turned her face the color of her hair. Seizing her sword, she stalked several yards away.
“Good luck Guen-Tae-kun!” Yun-ho beamed up at him, leaning up for a kiss of her own.

With a chuckle, he obliged, before walking over to Yona-hime, stopping a few paces away from her. “Ready?” He asked.

Taking a deep breath, she took a ready position as she exhaled, opening her eyes. That look kind of reminds me of Su-won-sama… He thought, sliding into a ready stance himself.

The spectators, which included Captain Gi-gan, felt like they were holding their breaths, waiting for one of them to make a move.

Guen-Tae lunged forward, slashing in an upward diagonal, that Yona dodged, ducking down to slash at his legs. Letting his momentum carry him forward, he avoided the slash, and they ended up in positions opposite of those they had started in.

She leapt forward to attack next, with an overhead downward strike. Jerking back, he aimed for her dominant sword arm, only to be parried. The look in her eyes was chillingly similar to his king’s, only blazing with fire as they struggled to push the other’s blade away. But he still had the advantage of size and strength, and as he pressed that advantage, he was blindsided by a sweeping kick to his torso.

They retreated a little. She fought the urge to rub at where her foot made contact with his torso, while he sized up the blow and decided he’d probably be bruised by the next morning. Charging forward, the air filled with the sounds of metal striking metal, as they traded strikes. “Not too bad.” He remarked, disengaging and leaping back.

“I’m overjoyed to hear that.” She deadpanned, sliding back into a ready position.

It was then that something weird happened. Suddenly, in Yona-hime’s place, there was a man in armor, long crimson hair blowing in the wind. The eyes were the same, right down to the fire burning within. He blinked hard, and when he opened his eyes, the man had vanished, leaving only Yona-hime.

Shaking his head slightly, he charged forward again. She twirled out of the way, swinging at his back as she completed her spin. He couldn’t dodge in time, and he was struck in the back with the flat of the blade. The force behind the strike was stronger than he expected, and he couldn’t contain his flinch. Whirling around, his sword was blocked with the flat of the blade, and she was bracing the blade at the other end. The face of the man who appeared earlier ghosted over hers for an instant. A little (a lot) unnerved, he pulled back.

Despite the weird appearance of the crimson-haired man, and the lack of a ‘war game’, her demeanor echoed her cousin’s, and Guen-Tae could picture himself fighting alongside her.

This is a king I could fight for.

“I concede the match.” He decided, sheathing his sword.

Hak burst out laughing. “So my princess impressed you?”

“She has a good teacher, and a good look in her eyes when she fights.” Guen-Tae said with a shrug. “So are you up for fighting?” He asked Kija, whom Jaeha had finally let up.

“Of course I am!” Kija asserted.

“Good luck Kija!” Yona said brightly, leaning up to give him a kiss on the cheek, making him turn
Guen-Tae cocked an eyebrow, but, with a mental shrug, decided to let it go. “Show me the power that founded my Tribe.” He told Kija as he settled into a ready stance.

The dragon arm expanded, and Guen-Tae couldn’t help being impressed at the expression on Kija’s face. It seemed like the sheltered rich boy who had shrieked when a honeybee flew ‘too close’ (actually five feet away) on their way here was an illusion, and he felt himself grin.

_This was gonna be good._

“Kija, you just had to beat him, not beat him up!”

“I didn’t hit him that hard! He’s a General like Hak was! He should have been able to handle it!”

“Except Raiju’s a special kind of beast.”

With a groan, Guen-Tae opened his eyes, regretting it as the sun hit his eyes, making his head throb. His head was pillowed on his wife’s lap, and the others were crowded around. “What the hell hit me?”

“An overeager rare beast.” Yun deadpanned. “Thankfully he didn’t send you flying away. But I’d avoid any more fighting for the next few days.”

Sitting up, Guen-Tae saw a sheepish-looking Kija bowing in apology. “Please forgive my eagerness!”

“Kid, never apologize for eagerness.” Guen-Tae scolded with an eye roll, slowly getting to his feet.

“Oh! I promised to meet up with Yuri!” Yona exclaimed.

“HOLD IT!!! I NEED TO CHECK YOUR BACK! AND YOUR FOOT!” Yun roared.

“Zeno thought you said the Miss’s back was healed up?” Zeno asked.

“It’s still a fresh scar!” Yun countered, grabbing Yona’s foot that she had kicked Guen-Tae with and began to prod and poke.

“Wait, Yona-san was injured?” Yun-ho asked.

“We were guests of An Lili, the daughter of General Jun-gi at an inn in Shisen, that happened to be the one where the drug lord Hiyou was staying in. Lili and I stumbled across him, and I got slashed across my back when I was protecting her.” Yona explained, putting up with Yun’s examination.

“It SEEMS fine, but come get me if it starts hurting.” Yun declared. “We need to get back to the mansion for me to check your back.”

As the group headed back to the mansion, Guen-Tae found himself trailing behind, watching his wife chat with Yona-hime. “Maybe next time we can have a real fight.” He commented to himself. “Or I can fight that blond kid…”

“Eh? The Earth General wants to fight Zeno?” Guen-Tae couldn’t contain his jump when Zeno suddenly spoke up from somewhere around his elbow. “Zeno’s not sure that’s very smart.”

“Why’s that?” Guen-Tae asked, looking at Zeno.
Meeting his eyes, Zeno was suddenly serious. “Zeno doesn’t fight; he kills.” He said quietly, before he darted ahead to walk next to Shin-ah.

_I remember where I’ve met that kid before! But that was, what, twenty, twenty five years ago? He has to be at least forty, so why does he still look like a kid?_

Chapter End Notes

I realized that I hadn't had a Ha-kun dream sequence in a while, so I figured Yona agreeing to fight Guen-Tae could trigger a dream.

Yeah, I never had a fight between Guen-Tae and Kija written. But it's funnier the way I have it.

What did Hak whisper to Yona? We might find out... (horned halo)
Thirteen year old Li Guen-Tae stared in awe at the blond guy who had just saved him. Being young and stupid and confident in his navigational skills, he had gone out into the woods and gotten very, very lost. During his blind wanderings, he managed to stumble into the camp of a notorious bandit gang, rumored to sell people to Kai. Not being a complete idiot, he had bolted, getting some distance between him and the bandits before he ran off of a blind drop.

With his left leg twisted in a way that was decidedly NOT healthy, Guen-Tae was stuck. A squad of five bandits found him. He brandished his sword at them, determined not to be an easy mark. They laughed, one of them commenting that his resistance was ‘cute’.

Someone landed on the shoulders of the designated leader of the group. “Oops! Miscalculated that!” It was a blond kid, not much older than him, dressed in dirty traveling clothes, rubbing the back of his head as he said that.

Growling, the bandit grabbed the blond guy, tossing him at the rock face above Guen-Tae’s head. The guy managed some kind of spin or tumble in mid-air, so his feet were leading. Using the rock face as a springboard, he leapt back at the one who threw him.

Before Guen-Tae realized it, the ‘leader’ was on the ground. He was pretty sure he saw the blond guy punch him, which fit with how the guy’s face looked. In the sun filtering through the trees, Guen-Tae thought he saw golden scales on the skin of his arm that was revealed when he raised his arm.

The other four bandits jumped the guy. Seizing the fallen bandit’s sword, what followed was the kind of lethal dance of sword work that his old man and Wind General Mun-dok excelled in. The bandits fell to the ground, dead…and not necessarily in one piece.

The pain in his left leg was really bad, and he felt weird, but for now, it was easy to focus on the blond guy. “That was so cool! Could you teach me?” He asked, trying to do puppy eyes that he was getting too old to pull off.

“That?” The blond guy blinked at him, almost like he was baffled that anyone would want to learn the moves he’d just done. “There’s nothing really to teach; just a lot of practice.”

“That’s the same dodging answer my old man gives me all the time!” Guen-Tae grumbled, crossing his arms in a pout. “Hey…do you think you can carry me out? The rest of the bandit gang is sure to come looking for these guys, and if they realized who I was, they wouldn’t want their big payout to get away.”

“Trust me kid, these guy’s ‘buddies’ aren’t in a position to come looking for them, or you.” The blond assured him as he quickly raided the couple bags the dead bandits had. “Damn, nothing I can use…”

Walking over to Guen-Tae, he crouched down to survey his leg. “It’s gonna really hurt, when I move you.” He warned.

“I’m gonna be the next Earth General; I can take a little pain!” He boasted.

With a shrug, the blond picked him up. The pain flared back into the forefront of his attention, and
the colors of the landscape swam together. He felt like throwing up, and he was about to warn his
‘rescuer’ when the sound of crumbling rock distracted him. The blond muttered something under his
breath, probably a curse, as he darted out of the way of the falling rocks.

The sound tickled his memory. Squinting at the trees, he realized where he was. “This is Falling
Stones Pass! When you’re facing south in here, and go towards the rising sun, you’ll come out near
a town! Damn, I didn’t think I had gotten THAT far.” Guen-Tae exclaimed.

“Do you know how long it’ll take to get there? It’s been awhile since Z-I was in the area.” The
blond asked as he followed Guen-Tae’s direction and started walking away from the setting sun.

“Maybe an hour or two by horse?” He hedged. “And why are you calling me a kid?! I’m thirteen!”

“One, you don’t look thirteen, and two, I’m still older than you.” The blond pointed out. “So you’re
in line to become the Earth General?”

“Yup! I’m Li Guen-Tae, son of Li Guen-shi, grandson of Guen-jin, great-grandson of Guen-dok.”
Guen-Tae introduced himself.

“…Does ‘Guen’ turn up a lot as part of a name in your family?” The blond asked, a weird note to
his voice.

“Well yeah; Tribe legend says that the founder of the Earth Tribe, the Dragon Warrior Hakuryuu,
had been named ‘Guen’ before he was a Dragon Warrior, so all Earth Generals have ‘Guen’ in
their name. Even the ones who overthrew the old General and his family change their names to have
‘Guen’ in it.” Guen-Tae explained.

The guy hummed in response. “Are you SURE the rest of the bandits won’t be coming after us?”
Guen-Tae asked, a little worried, even though he’d never admit to it out loud. “I heard that they
kidnap people and sell them to the Kai Empire to be slaves.”

“I don’t think dead people can chase after us.” The blond assured him. “They came across my
camp when they were chasing you.”

“So you killed them?”

“I don’t take kindly to people trying to kidnap me, or kill me. And when I heard them say they were
chasing a kid…” The blond shrugged carefully, doing his best to not jostle Guen-Tae’s leg.

Guen-Tae frowned at the back of the guy’s head. It bothered him a little, how casually his savior
spoke about killing. “…so you killed all of them?”

“Do you think I shouldn’t have? I’m all alone, with no way to control prisoners. Knowing what
they’ve done, and what they will continue to do if they stay alive…I think one or two got away.” The
blond’s tone of voice sounded weird. “I try to be terrifying, if I have to fight. But I prefer running
away.”

“What?! But you totally slaughtered those guys! Are you saying that if you hadn’t heard them
mention me, you’d have just run?!” Guen-Tae protested.

“Do you know how hard it is to get blood out of your clothes? I have to look a bit presentable if I go
near towns.” The blond countered.

That…wasn’t really an answer, but Guen-Tae left that alone as another question formed. “This is
kinda off the beaten path; what were you doing, camping out here?” He asked.
“I’m just lazily traveling around, while I wait for someone.” His voice turned fond at the end.

“Someone? Who?”

“Someone very important to me, and very precious as well. I don’t know when they’ll come back, or where, so I’m just traveling while I wait.” He explained.

“Well that’s not very polite of the guy if he won’t tell you when or where to expect him.” Guen-Tae said bluntly.

They were at the outskirts of the town Guen-Tae had mentioned. Maybe it was because of the conversation, maybe it was the lingering shock, but it felt like the guy had somehow travelled faster than a horse, to reach the town as quickly as they had.

The guy carefully set him down next to a tree, so he could lean against it. “I guess you’re right. But it’s okay; Zeno’s good at waiting!” Flashing a bright smile, his demeanor shifting to someone younger, the blond almost melted back into the woods.

Guen-Tae cornered Zeno, using his larger size to trap him in the corner of the hallway, as Zeno waited for Yun to finish up with Yona. “Twenty-five years ago, Falling Stones Pass. You look the same now as you did then.”

Zeno’s face was neutral. “Does it really make a difference, what answer I give?”

“Should it make a difference?” Guen-Tae countered.

Silence stretched between them. Finally, Guen-Tae backed up. Zeno walked away, Guen-Tae’s gaze heavy on his back. “Is she who you were waiting for?”

Zeno half-turned back to look at him, the amulet on his scarf riveting Guen-Tae’s attention. “You saw him, when you fought the Miss. Is there anyone else who could have gathered my brothers and me together?”

Jin looked up as several people entered his shop. “Ah, hello Yuri.” He greeted the one he did know, casting an eye over the people with her. A blond boy dressed in orange, a vaguely familiar dark-haired man in blue, an equally vaguely familiar girl in a cloak, and a boy with feathers in his hair.

He recognized the last person. “You’re…” He trailed off, looking away as his wife, Ako, approached, visibly pregnant.

The boy looked relieved to see the baby bump. “That’s good. I wasn’t sure if the stress might have…”

“How are you doing?” The cloaked girl asked gently. She had kind eyes, and her hair seemed to be an unusual shade. “I wish I had intervened, when I saw the commotion. I’m sorry for your loss.” She bowed a little as she gave her condolences.

“This is Lina. She and her friends helped the pirates defeat Kum-ji. She snuck in with us last group of girls so the pirates could find us before we ended up sold.” Yuri introduced her.

“How far along are you?” Lina asked as the boys started browsing, the man waiting by the door.

“Five months or so I think. I wasn’t a hundred percent sure, and I feared the stress of what happened
would kill the baby if I was really pregnant, but this little one survived.” She said, rubbing her belly.

“…what was his name?” Lina whispered Ako quietly as Jin went to tally up what the boys had picked out.

“…Kenji. He…would have been nine, this upcoming autumn equinox.” Ako replied, equally quiet.

Lina grabbed her hand, and Ako felt paper. “It’s small, compared to what you’ve lost, but I hope it can help a little, with the new baby coming.”

Jin, bidding the group farewell, came over. “What’s that?” He asked.

“I’m not…sure…” She trailed off as she unfolded the paper.

As a shop keepers daughter and wife, she could read, but she was having trouble believing what was written on the paper. “Jin…read this and tell me I’m not reading it wrong.” She said, handing over the paper.

His mouth dropped open as he read it. “If you read that this is a note promising compensation, in the form of a large sum of money, for Kenji’s death, and bearing the seal of Crown Princess Yona…you read it right.”

Ako stared at the door. “Jin? If the baby’s a girl…we’re naming her Lina.”

“I’m sorry your fight with Kija ended up the way it did.” Yona apologized to Guen-Tae as she joined him on the veranda.

The old pirate crew would be gathering later, out at their cove, with some of the girls rescued and their families, for a big party.

“Well the spar with you more than makes up for it.” He waved off her apology. “…the look in your eyes, it reminded me of His Majesty.” He told her quietly. “At least, when he stopped being an idiot and got visibly serious.”

She didn’t respond to this statement. “You became General around the time Grandfather died, yes?” She asked, changing the topic.

“Yeah. So?”

“So whose decision was it, to support Father’s ascension over Uncle’s? Yours, or your fathers?” She asked, not looking at him. “Kan Su-jin likely felt any coup he attempted would be more successful against Father, while Mun-dok had his doubts about Uncle off the battlefield. I have no insight into the reasoning behind the decisions of Water and Sky. If the decision was yours, why support Father?”

He scratched the back of his head. “My old man and I both knew he could go at any time, so I was the de facto Earth General the last year of his life. I discussed it with him, but the decision was mine, in the end.” He said.

Wrinkling his nose at his wife’s tea, he paused as he considered how to explain his decision. “Prince Yuhon, like Kan Su-jin, was someone I could trust to have my back on the battlefield.” He began. “But not off the battlefield, or at any other point in a campaign.”

“How come?” She asked, aware of her dragons edging closer, with varying degrees of stealth.
“His approach to logistics was terrible. True, a commander shouldn’t be focused on the fine details of supplies, but he didn’t have the basics, of rations and weapons, properly seen to. Oh he’d make sure HE was properly supplied and supported, and punished people if that didn’t happen, but the rest of his troops? If you weren’t one of his favored that he doled out bits of his supplies to, from what I saw and my soldiers told me, you could expect a cold, miserable campaign with little food and rusted swords.” He revealed, making her choke on her tea.

“For real?” She demanded, and he nodded in confirmation. “But if that was the case, why do Sky Tribe still honor him? Especially the majority?”

“He won battles. Causality figures were high, both from battle injuries and camp illness, but he had just enough charisma to convince them that all of their suffering was worth the victory, and with his favorites in positions of authority, the rest kept their heads down. And memories fade.” Guen-Tae explained. “Sometimes his aide de camp took care of supplies for the majority, but not often.”

“So he treated most of the troops poorly, but he was able to convince them the victories were worth it, or to keep their mouths shut.” Yona repeated. “Was there anything else?”

He stood and walked a few steps forward, raising his head to contemplate the sky. “…he wanted to take over our mines.” He finally said, making everyone in hiding stumble or fall out in shock. “He wanted them under royal control, so he could dictate things like output and wages. Back then, we had signs the mines were starting to be played out. With Prince Yuhon calling the shots, he would have them working increasingly played out seams, in increasingly dangerous conditions, and reduced pay. The miners are paid based on the number of hours a day they work; he mentioned paying them based on how much they dug out in a day.”

“But how was he planning on doing that?!?” Yona marveled. “The mines are deeded to the office of the Earth Tribe’s leader or general, in perpetuity. That’s been reaffirmed after every dynasty change, and nearly every King reconfirms it when they ascend. There’s no legal basis by which to seize control.”

“There’s two ways I heard about, where he could have gotten control of the mines. The first is through the operators. Yes, ownership of the mines rests with the Earth General, but we in turn lease out the mines to the people who actually run the operation. So, conceivably, Prince Yuhon could have gotten an ally to make an offer the current operators could not refuse.” Guen-Tae explained.

“That’s…scarily plausible.” Hak conceded, as he and the others were no longer pretending to not be spying on the meeting. “What was the second?”

Guen-Tae had to fight back a smile. “The second, was to claim that since the mines were deeded to us by a ‘god’, not a king, that us having ownership was in violation of the sovereignty of the king.”

Everyone gaped at him. Finally, Yona spoke the thought that all of them were thinking, using language she properly shouldn’t have used, but was utterly appropriate.

“What the fuck was he smoking?!”

Guen-Tae burst out laughing with that, as much from the shock of hearing the princess curse as from her expression as what she had said processed.

“Alright, explain again what exactly you’re asking.” Guen said.
him up that he had had about waking her up, just working her way out of the embrace they had ended up in during the night.

Thankfully, she hadn’t said anything about the burgeoning erection he just knew she had to have felt.

With a sigh, Hiryuu repeated the thoughts that had gone through his head when he had first woken up this morning, about how he had wanted to feel her lips and trace the edge of her robe framing her breasts with his fingers and tongue and how good feeling her ass against his groin had been.

“Dear god King, just sleep with her!” Shuten exclaimed, chin propped in his hand in a way that said he didn’t understand the fuss Hiryuu was causing over this. “I know you’re naïve, but you do know how to put the sword in the sheath, right?”

Zeno looked like he had a question, but decided against speaking while Hiryuu answered Shuten. “I know about that, and the basics about how it works, but I’ve never done it! And I’ve never felt like this or wanted to do things with someone before!”

Shuten’s chin slid off his palm and his face hit the table. “You’re fucking kidding me; you haven’t had your cherry popped?”

“Cherry? Why would I have a cherry to be popped?” Hiryuu asked baffled.

“Why would you pop a cherry anyway?” Zeno added, echoing Hiryuu’s confusion.

Abi hid his face behind his hand. “He’s asking if you’re really a virgin.” He explained.

“I thought only girls were virgins?” Zeno questioned, Hiryuu nodding in agreement.

“Technically speaking, ‘virgin’ can refer to anyone who has never had sex, even if in common usage it’s only applied to girls. It’s more important for girls to stay virgins until marriage then for guys.” Abi explained. “So you’ve never felt sexual attraction to anyone before?”

Hiryuu nodded. “Yes. When I’d wake up in the mornings, sometimes I’d explore and stuff, but there’s never been anyone I’ve wanted to do stuff with.”

“You watched a lot before you descended, right? Didn’t you watch any brothels?” Guen asked.

“Those places with red lanterns outside? Never; they felt too wrong, and how would watching a brothel help here?” Hiryuu asked with a frown.

“Well if you want to consummate the marriage, why didn’t you last night?” Abi asked, a little baffled himself now. Hiryuu-ou-sama had always been an atypical royal, but it seems what he had seen so far was merely the tip of it.

“We haven’t even really talked to each other! I want to know more about the person I’ve pledged to share my life with and the future mother of my children before I take a huge step like that!” Hiryuu replied passionately.

Abi and Shuten exchanged a ‘is he for real’ look. “Except we’re talking about sex, not romance. Not the same thing.” Shuten said.

“It’s not?!.” Zeno and Hiryuu exclaimed.

“Romance is a completely separate thing from sex, especially here. You have plenty of time for romance, while the marriage must be consummated before the end of the first year. Ideally, she
should be pregnant at minimum by that time, like my wife was.” Abi lectured.


“You’re married?!” Zeno and Hiryuu exclaimed.

“I didn’t think you knew what sex was!” Shuten exclaimed.

“I figured you’d been with someone, but not that you were married.” Guen added.

“You could have said something!” Hiryuu scolded.

“Why? My marriage has no bearing on my service to you, Ou-sama. Her family needed someone to sire an heir, and since I am a spare several times over, I was a logical choice.” Abi stated.

“Your service isn’t the be all end all of your lives, at least to me. Even if my brothers hadn’t done what they had, I would still want to know, as your friend.” Hiryuu said with a frown. “So don’t be afraid to have her and your children come visit, or to ask to go visit them. How many children do you have with her?”

“Our son is five, and our daughter just turned two. Jun and Haruko.” Abi replied. “And she has her own household and lands to run, so it is more practical to visit her, instead of the other way around.”

“Ya sure you’re not worried she’ll see some handsome devil here and change her mind?” Shuten challenged with a sly look.

Abi sipped his tea with his eyes closed, a tactic he had developed so he and Shuten didn’t end up paralyzed every time he was stupid enough to earn a glare. “Given how she was born blind, you don’t have to worry about her taking one look at your face and fainting.” His voice was icy. “Can we return to the topic at hand here?”

“So when I want to see how well her pants fit her hips and taste the skin of her breasts it means I’m sexually attracted to her?” Hiryuu asked, wanting to make sure he was understanding it right.

“Pretty much. While wanting to know her as a person is more akin to romance.” Guen confirmed.

“So do I just tell her all of this or do I keep quiet?” Hiryuu asked with a tilt of his head.

This time Zeno joined the other three in their face palm. True, he was nearly as innocent as Hiryuu was, but he still knew that you don’t just bring stuff like that up randomly with your new wife, let alone one you barely knew.

“I suppose Yona DID already know what she was expecting, wanting to marry me, if she remembers Hiryuu-ou having questions like this.” Su-won noted to himself, stopping for the night.

In the morning he would be departing for the border to meet up with General Guen-Tae. Tidying up, he slid into bed, only to find his mind still active.

“Wait…Ha-kun is Hak’s past self. That means he was a girl in his past life, like how Yona was a boy in her past life.” Su-won said out loud with a frown. “Shouldn’t I be more surprised by this?”

His mind flashed back to the one dream, where Yona and Hak had been joined by people he had taken as their opposite gender twins. “Hold it…did I seriously dream of Hiryuu-ou and Yona kissing while Ha-kun and Hak were…” He trailed off, face burning as he couldn’t bring himself to voice just
what Ha-kun and Hak had been doing to him in that dream.

Pulling his blanket over his head to hide from the world, he whispered, “Well, that would explain why I’m not surprised by that…”

Closing his eyes, Su-won did his best to shy away from thoughts of that bizarre, impossible dream, filled with illicit thrill.

Needless to say, in the morning, he woke up more tired than when he went to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes, a curse word is really the only response possible.

Given Guen-Tae’s demonstrated canon concern for the mines, I’m thinking that if Yuhon had wanted to go after the mines, that would have been reason enough for Guen-Tae to oppose his ascension. Given how only Kan Su-jin and Mun-dok are known to have been generals around the time of Il’s ascension, it’s hard to say the logic behind the Five Generals supporting Il over Yuhon, even if the Xing incident might have been a factor in canon (here it wasn’t widely known). Ju-do I’m pretty sure wasn’t a general at the time. Guen-Tae was likely old enough, and certainly has been a general longer than Ju-do, while Jun-gi is a question mark.

Might just be me, but I feel like Yona should have done more, after seeing the child in the shop had been killed. I know Yun likely treated the owner and his wife, but...

(shrug)

As for the dream Su-won’s talking about at the end, see the omake(?) What Hiryuu Is Up To With His Free Time Or Su-won's Dreams Get Weirder, at the end of Chapter 41.
Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

(passes out at the thought of writing seventy chapters with no end in sight)

Some sex in the middle-ish

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flicking her tessen closed, Yona bowed to her audience, who were quiet a moment before they started clapping. “That was beautiful Lina!” Yuri gushed, stars in her eyes.

“You looked so adorable!” Yun-ho chimed, drawing a few confused stares at her terminology.

Various similar comments floated up from the gathered crowd at the pirates’ cove. After supervising the preparation, Yun had been chased away from the cooking area by the mothers. The overall good mood meant he wasn’t overly offended. A full moon gleamed above, bright enough to rival the torches scattered about the area.

Reunited with his erhu, which was too delicate for the kind of traveling they were doing, Jaeha started up another song, slower than the previous one she had danced to.

It was the song he would play for her in their shared dreams. With a soft smile, Yona began a dance that the onlookers would later agree gave the impression of flying.

Guen-Tae found his way to stand next to Hak. Watching a tipsy Kija surrounded by a cluster of girls had gotten boring, he was quietly freaked out by the look on Zeno’s face as he relieved a group of ex-pirates of their money in a drinking contest, and Shin-ah was nowhere to be seen.

Hak was watching Yona like he always did, a mostly untouched bottle of wine next to him. “Do you ever take a break from watching her?” Guen-Tae had to ask as he sat down next to Hak.

“I don’t watch in the privy.” Hak replied, utterly serious.

Guen-Tae rolled his eyes. “So when did things change?” He asked.

Hak didn’t need to ask what he meant. “After that annoying bastard Tae-Jun attacked us in the cliffs. Gramps has the contract.”

“That part is none of my business as long as no proof emerges.” Guen-Tae said. “You’ve taught her well.”

“Well, she got some help with the sword work. The main problem, according to her, was the physical differences.” Hak shrugged off the praise. “Frankly it would turn out to be more shocking if he didn’t show himself.”

Unspoken was the knowledge of who ‘he’ was.

“…it’s weird. Both King Ju-nam and King Il had been so sure about it, but it always seemed… impossible.” Guen-Tae admitted. “But now? It’s impossible not to believe.”
“It would be easier if she stayed out of trouble, but that won’t happen. I think she feels like she has to get involved, to make up for it. For letting His Majesty coddle her, for not pressing harder or doing more. For not changing things enough…so His Majesty would not have been murdered for being a poor King.” The last part was said so quietly that Guen-Tae only just heard it, Hak gulping half his bottle down at the end.

As he went to set the bottle back down, there was Yona, plucking it from his grasp and taking a slip herself. “Are you sulking?” She asked, cheeks pink from the dancing.

“Why would I be sulking?” Hak countered with a pout. The party was winding down, people drifting back home or into nooks or curling up wherever.

“Do I really need to say it?” She asked flatly, Guen-Tae watching the byplay with amusement. “C’mon, you owe me my reward for winning, and you don’t get to go back on it through the technicality of General Guen-Tae conceding the match.”

His hand grabbed, Hak let himself be pulled up (well, pretended to let himself) and dragged away in the direction of Captain Gi-gan’s ship. Where there were surfaces softer than bare rock, walls to shield, and most important of all, doors that locked.

“Guen-Tae-kun!” Yun-ho cheered, draping herself over her husband’s lap. “Did you have fun fighting Yona-san?” She asked, hooking her arms around his neck.

“You know it, and you’re drunk.” He said, feeling the press of the dagger she thought he didn’t know she carried.

“Am not!” She protested, sticking her tongue out.

Rolling his eyes and getting his arms situated right, he stood, making her laugh. “Are you following Yona-san’s and Hak-san’s idea?” She asked. “Carrying me away to be ravished?”

“I think in their case, it’s more a ‘drag him off and jump his bones’.” He countered as he passed Kija, now passed out drunk, the squirrel on top of him in the same position.

Jaeha was letting himself be taken to a quiet corner by one of his old favorites from before. Like after the last party, Yun surveyed the carnage. “Why do people keep doing this?” He wondered for the umpteenth time, shaking his head.

“We’ll tell you when you’re older lad!” Zeno skipped over, flinging his arms around Yun’s shoulders in a hug.

“You’re not that much older than me! Why do you call me ‘lad’ anyway?” Yun protested verbally, not bothering to try shrugging Zeno off.

Zeno burst out laughing, much to Yun’s (and any remaining conscious partiers) confusion. “Okay what was so funny about that?! I know you’re not drunk…”

Shin-ah turned out to be perched up high, like one of those dragon statues builders put on building corners to guard against destruction. He was watching something, but Guen-Tae had no clue what. Yun-ho had started snoring lightly, head resting on his shoulder. “And you said you’re not drunk…” He commented quietly, walking onto the ship.

“‘m not drunk.” She protested defiantly, lifting her head to glare him in the eye.

After a brief glance to check that the first open door led to a room that had something other than floor
and was empty, he claimed her mouth with his, kicking the door shut behind them. Her hands pulled at his hair tie, pulling it undone and revealing the sight she had claimed for herself: him with his hair down. Not only was his hair surprisingly soft, he was super deliciously hot.

The flat surface turned out to be a padded bench, but it would serve well enough. “You and my hair.” He mock-grumbled, sitting down.

“Like you don’t know how sexy you are with it down.” She countered, pulling back just enough to give him access to her sash.

“You know what’s really sexy? The thought of you walking around armed.” He countered, sliding out the dagger from where it was tucked away.

“I thought you hadn’t noticed.”

“I usually don’t, or I’d never get anything done around you.” He explained, tasting her pulse point on her neck.

She made a sound that was a weird mix of a snort and a moan. “Like the potential results of this isn’t on the ‘to do someday’ list.” She reminded him, reaching inside his robes to run her hands over his muscles.

Slowly, he pulled her sash undone and off, reluctantly pulling back to let her stand and shrug her clothes off. “You, my good sir, are very overdressed for this occasion.” She pointed out, stretching her arms up and flushing a little as his eyes watched her breasts.

“Then I better stop being overdressed.” He said with a smirk, standing and stripping himself.

Guen-Tae sauntered over to Yun-ho, backing her against the door. Somehow, her hair was still in its side bun. Kissing her hard, he caressed a breast with his hand while he destroyed her bun with the other. Bracing her shoulders against the door, she wrapped her legs around his waist, bringing their groins into intimate contact.

She twisted a hand in his hair as he grabbed her behind and carried her back to the bench, kissing all the way. Back on the bench and pulling back to hover over her, he ground his dick into her folds, rubbing but not actually penetrating. “Tae-kun!” She protested with a sultry pout, twisting one of his nipples in her fingers in retaliation.

Groaning, he nonetheless complied with her unspoken demand, sinking into her familiar heat. Panting, she pressed a hand down low, where she could almost feel him. Rising up onto his knees, he grabbed her hips and brought them with him, leaving only her shoulders on the bench.

Despite her daintiness, caution was not something she tolerated in this private world of theirs, and soon he was thrusting hard enough to hear the smack of skin on skin, her hips meeting his as much by her own action as by his hands on her hips. The thought of an ill-defined period of time without her at his side spurred him, and then she was shuddering her release. He kept thrusting through her release until he tipped over the edge himself, filling her.

Taking slow, deliberate breaths, she pressed her hand against her belly again, above where she could feel the heat of his seed. “A little boy just like you would be nice.” She whispered.

“I was an unholy terror as a boy. I made my old man grey by the time I was ten.” He countered, doing his best to lay down beside her and not on top of her. “I’d like a girl, nearly as pretty as you are, who will not be courting until she is thirty. At minimum.”
Yun-ho giggled. “It would be your luck to end up with several daughters to fret over, every one of them as headstrong and stubborn as you.” She giggled more at the face he made at the idea.

They were quiet for a few minutes, basking in the moment, before Guen-Tae quietly asked, “Does this mean we’re going to start trying for real?”

“Su-won-sama is more inclined to battle than King Il, and I think Yona-san would not disdain battle either. What better way to inspire you to come home safe than the thought of little ones at home?” She brought up. “Though we can’t rule out additions to the royal family within the next five years.” She added.

“You pairing our kids off already?” He questioned with raised eyebrow.

“You said it, not me.” She said primly. “You can’t deny the possibility hasn’t crossed your mind.”

“Bit early for matchmaking. Su-won-sama is nowhere near marriage, and there’s no guarantee of success for Yona-hime.” He reminded her, running a hand through his hair.

“She’s a Kashi, like I am. Don’t underrate her odds of succeeding. That’s why you’re voting for her, should the day come.” She commented, muffling a yawn at the end. Alcohol made her sleepy and horny in near equal measure, and with the latter satisfied, the former was gaining ground.

“Yes ma’am.” He agreed, rising to retrieve their clothes to use as some kind of blankets for the night.

“Jaeha, if you don’t stop sighing, I’m kicking you out of the nook.” Mariko, one of Jaeha’s favorites from his days as an Awa local, decreed. “What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing! It was good-great-wonderful!” He protested.

“But not what you wanted, or who you wanted it with.” She deduced. “Is it Sayuri-sama’s outside daughter?”

“You mean Yona-chan?” He asked, having never heard of an ‘outside daughter’. “What is an ‘outside daughter’?”

“‘Outside daughter’ refers to a girl you’ve mentored who is either not a part of your house, or who doesn’t follow you into the business.” She explained. “And yes, ‘Yona-chan’.”

She eyed his right leg. While this time neither had undressed more than necessary, she had gained enough of his trust to have seen his knee, where skin turned into scales. “Is it because of that?”

A long moment later, he shook his head. “No…there was nothing different from the times before, but it was…empty?” Just in time, he bit back a sigh that threatened to escape, grimacing as he thought of how to describe what was wrong.

“Hmmm…” She hummed. “I think I know what’s wrong. You want it to mean something. More than the pursuit of pleasure or profit.”

“I’m not quite sure I follow…?”

“It’s something they aim to train out of us, or the lifestyle can do it. Sex is my job; client satisfaction is the name of the game, and the pleasure I get is a bonus. But outside the dream of the teahouses, sex isn’t an action divorced from all but physical pleasure. It’s…a way to connect to another person, as much about emotional satisfaction as physical pleasure. ‘An expression of love’, the romance tales
like to call it I think.” She explained. “You want to make love to someone you love. And that’s not me.” There was a touch of wistfulness and longing in her voice.

Jaeha grabbed her hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry.”

Mariko shrugged. “Don’t be sorry. I’ve seen it happen several times. A man falls in love and sex for its own sake goes away. Of course, sometimes they’ll come back years later. But is it Yona-san?” She asked, curious.

“Yona-chan…that’s too tangled a mix to really hash out what I feel about her. I don’t think I’m in love with her, but sex with her would probably mean something.” He admitted out loud. “Dare I say that sex for its own sake has become boring? Not unwelcome, but…”

“You can say ‘dull’. My ego isn’t that attached to my sexual skills.” She said drily. “It does happen on occasion for a man to find something more important than his balls.”

Reaching into her sleeve, she pulled out the money pouch he thought she hadn’t noticed him slipping in. “As weird as it sounds, you’re one of the few real friends I have. So the next time you try to pay me for some physical pleasure I’m ramming it down your throat.”

“Yesamam.” He wisely agreed, accepting the pouch back.

Then an idea hit him. “What about paying you to do something else?”

She eyed him like one would eye a snake in the grass. “Who are you embarrassing this time?”

“Cuddle up to Kija and act like the two of you had a wild night?” He suggested.

“The one in white?” She asked, tapping her finger on her lip.

He nodded. “Nope.” She decided. “It would have more effect if there was more of us. Stop trying to give me money. I still got some profitable years in me.”

Jaeha didn’t bother trying to contain his sigh. Mariko, for her part, didn’t go through with her threat and kick him out.

That morning, Yona was awake first. Dressing quickly, she quietly slipped out of the room she and Hak had shared the night before. Across the hall and to the left, she was greeted by Yun-ho doing the same thing. Trading knowing looks, they left the ship.

Yun was up, starting breakfast. Kija was nearby, still passed out drunk, with Zeno shamelessly using his body as a pillow. “Morning Yun. Do you want help?” Yona asked as they approached.

“Nah, Shin-ah’s already up, so he’s my gopher today.” Right on cue, Shin-ah appeared with a basket of abalone.

“Sleep well Shin-ah?” Yona asked, following Shin-ah as Yun-ho stayed behind with Yun, who was grilling her about her tea.

He shrugged. He had spent most of the night watching Ayumi in Fuuga. Something about seeing the couples sneak away to be alone brought her to mind. “Once we’re done at the border, is there somewhere you’d like to go?” She asked.

She was tempted to suggest Hakuryuu Village, but the presence of Seiryuu Village there was a trigger point for his power’s curse.
“…Fuuga?” He proposed.

She had a feeling he wanted to go to Fuuga because of the girl she remembered him spending the engagement party with, but she didn’t want to embarrass him by bringing her up. “I should check in with Mundok anyway.” She simply said, picking up the spice mix Yun had sent them to get.

Walking back, she grabbed his hand and squeezed. While Shin-ah was doing better with crowds, she had a feeling last night’s party might have been a bit much. “You need some more sun. You’re out in the sun, but you’re so covered up all the time it doesn’t help.” She commented, eyeing his fingertips.

“…won’t I burn?” He asked, remembering the times Kija had fretted over that.

“If you’re careful you won’t. I just worry, since you spent so much time in the caves.” She said, letting go of his hand as they returned to Yun’s cooking area, where Yun-ho had disrupted his efforts to learn the secret of her tea by going on about how cute and adorable he was.

Guen-Tae who had just arrived, managed to contain his laughter as he distracted his wife from the boy. Yona hovered by Yun’s cooking area, watching, while Shin-ah went and sat down by Zeno and Kija, Ao only a little unsteady as she leapt to him.

With his fluff nearby, Zeno latched onto it like always, snuggling in. “Where’s Mister and Ryokuryuu?” He asked. “If they don’t hurry up the food will disappear into our bellies!”

“Damn I wish I could eat again.” Shuten complained as Hak, Jaeha, and Mariko appeared.

“Try not to wear it this time Hime-san.” Hak warned as he passed Yona her bowl.

She flushed, remembering the incident.

It was later, away from Guen-Tae, that the topic of the border was raised. “How much can we trust that he’s doing this because of the people Kum-ji sold?” Hak broached the topic, crossing his arms.

“It’s likely a legitimate factor.” Yona decided. “But given the province that borders Earth…that might be more important.”

“How come?” Kija asked.

“The province bordering Earth is the Kin Province. When it was a part of Kouka, Uncle was governor. Father gave it to Southern Kai after Uncle’s death. Much like the Sen Province, it’s been bouncing between us and them for centuries.” Yona explained, running her fingers over her experimental patch of embroidery. “The river is important for trade into the interior, so depending on the temperaments of the rulers, it and its trade is either shared or hoarded.”

“Do you think there’ll be trouble?” Yun asked, concerned.

“…maybe. I’ll likely hear about how poor a governor Uncle was. But I still don’t get it.” She admitted.

“Get what?” Jaeha asked, looking up from the book he was only half-reading, Shin-ah peering over his shoulder.

“I always heard about what a great warrior Uncle was, how magnanimous he was about being passed over for the throne, how it meant he could fight to keep his little brother safe. But General Guen-Tae told us he was a poor commander, Mundok had mentioned how he responded to any
slight, real or imagined, with violence, and with his attempts on my life and killing Mother, it could be said he was hoping to leave his line as the only heirs to the throne. I know memories fade and the reluctance to speak ill of someone who brought us victories, but...I’m wondering if Uncle’s supporters have something to do with how he’s seen.” Yona explained. “I was always too scared of him.”

“He was very intimidating. At the time, with how Su-won looked up to him, I figured there must have been some side to him that wasn’t scary as all hell.” Hak agreed.

“Even when he wasn’t looking at me, whenever I saw him, all I ever felt from him was malice and hate and murderous intent. But that might have been me remembering who he had been.” Yona admitted.

“?” Everyone made questioning noises.

“I think he had been Yuhon of Chi, him-me’s enemy in uniting the peninsula...and the one about to kill him-me, when my brothers descended.” She revealed quietly.

Stunned silence was the only response anyone could muster. Finally, Yun spoke. “It’s kind of freaky that he ended up being your uncle then...”

“Not that much; he had been a cousin of past-Father. First-degree once removed, I think.” She remarked. “The real irony is that his son, Zheng, was the one to kill past-Father. Him-me fought and killed him, securing his throne.”

“You don’t think...” Kija began.

Yona shook her head. “Su-won doesn’t remind me of anyone from back then. He is not Zheng’s reincarnation.” I need to ask Zeno about his reaction when he saw Su-won in Water; he definitely recognized him from somewhere. Not from his time lurking in the castle, I’m sure of...”

Chapter End Notes

Pretty sure Su-won is partly remembering his father through rose-colored glasses. You have to wonder what other skeletons are in Yuhon’s closet; I doubt the Xing incident was an isolated event. I don’t think we can rule out someone playing up Yuhon’s legacy after his death either. Not Su-won; he’s too young.
“Hey, Zeno?” Yona asked the night before they reached the border as they gathered firewood. “What was up with your reaction to Su-won? You’ve seen him before at the castle, right?”

“But not up close. Zeno might be remembering wrong, but the little king reminded him of Won-shi, in his face and aura.” He answered.

She furrowed her brow. “…him-me’s great-grandson?”

He nodded. “Zeno might be remembering wrong though. At a minimum, there is a similarity between the two of you.”

“All I know is that he isn’t a soul I recognize from that time. But I’ve been feeling a little uneasy, the closer we get to the border.” She admitted.

“Eh? How come?”

“…I can’t place why I’d be uneasy. I’ve never gotten this close to the borders of Kouka before, in either life, but I can’t think of why I would be uneasy. And I’ve been dreaming. Of the small fires you dealt with.” She said quietly.

“You have?” He questioned, equally quiet.

“I can’t tell where you are or who you’re fighting. Just that you’re fighting.” She added.

Unspoken was the bloody self slaughter he went through at the start. “…no sense in borrowing trouble; it finds us well enough on its own.” He finally remarked.

“Maybe if we did as Yun badgers us to and not stand out?” She suggested.

A heartbeat later, they both burst out laughing. “We can’t not stand out any more than a tiger can change its stripes!” She got out through her giggles, leaning on him.

“No we can’t! The Dark Dragon and the Happy Hungry Bunch are meant to stand out!”

Yona couldn’t help being amused by the boy who had nicked her rice balls. Especially when he stared at her like she was the greatest thing ever after she shot down a bird for him to take to the cook shop. “YOU’RE SO COOL!” He yelled, getting agreeing nods from her dragons.

“I like you! Wanna be my bride?” The amiable mood instantly soured, even with Zeno’s unconcealed bemusement at the scene. “I live across the river, and once I’m thirteen I can marry, so it’d just be an engagement for now!” He explained, grabbed her hand to tug her along.

“But I’m already engaged; I can’t be engaged to two different people.” Yona told him.

“Can’t you just ditch him and come with me?” The soured mood around Hak turned murderous.

“Hmm…” Yona tapped her chin in mock thought. “My fiancé is very, very good at what he does, and I’m afraid I’d look very foolish if I let him get away.” Unknown to the boy, she sent a pulse of
lust and desire and a mental image of Hak on his knees tasting her to him.

(Hak turned bright red, and he clenched his fists when Jaeha sent him a knowing look, reminding himself not to punch him.)

“What’s he do so good that I can’t? And you don’t know I can’t do it as good unless you try me too!” The Monkeys and Kaya, being unseen by nearly everyone, were in various poses, bent over and on the ground from laughing so hard.

To be honest, most of Shuten’s laughter was because of how Kija was struggling to keep an angry face, even as an embarrassed blush filled his face as the implication hit him. “How dare you make such implications to my master--!!” He ground out.

“Huh? Are all these guys yours?” The boy asked with a blink, finally noticing how the men the cool girl was with all seemed kind of scary, all of a sudden.

“I like to think so, but I’m only engaged to one of them.” Yona hooked an arm around Hak’s, pulling him closer to her, sending the message that he was her fiancé. “So I can’t marry you.”

“Yes, go the blunt direction!” Yun muttered to himself, Shin-ah (!) nodding in agreement next to him.

“NO!” The boy cried, reminding Yona (and Hak) of Su-won’s reaction when Ju-do banned him from fighting in the tournament where Hak earned his first nickname, Raiju.

“Yona’s not giving herself to you. Give up.” Yun scolded, hands on his hips.

“No way!”

“Give up and I’ll give you a rice ball.” Yun held his hand out, said rice ball in hand.

“No way will a bribe that low work.” Abi protested, mostly recovered from his earlier laughter.

“You’re nice; come and marry me!”

Shuten’s mostly stifled cackles returned full-force. Growling, Abi jumped on him, intent on strangling him with his pony tail.

(Yun, while mostly immune to the phantom cackling, found himself twitching at it this time.)

“And these are the Four Dragon Warriors…” Kaya noted to herself, for the umpteenth time, with a sweat drop, and Guen declined to try and intervene and Zeno quickly shifted in long enough to trip Shuten and help Abi out.

“I may be a great beauty, but I’m a guy.” Yun said flatly, beyond used to marriage proposals and mostly just annoyed with the kid in general.

“Talk about easily impressed.” Guen remarked, Hak echoing something similar as he said, “What a susceptible kid. He’d get along great with you.” Snarking the last sentence to Jaeha.

“You’ve got that utterly wrong.” Jaeha protested, with a look on his face that said not even ice would melt in his mouth.

“Hey…” Yun started, as the strange kid started on his third rice ball. “You said your village is on the other side of the river, right? Is it south of here?”
The boy shook his face, mouth full. “West.”

“…the only thing west of here is the Kai Empire.” Yun noted.

“It’s in the Kai Empire.” The boy confirmed, making everyone give him strange looks as that proceeded.

“You’re from Kai? Where’s your family?” Yona asked, wondering if he was the child of a border merchant.

“By the river.” The boy said, not dodging the question but not giving a complete answer either.

“Why did you come to Kouka all by yourself?” She asked.

“…I wanted to see Kouka for myself.” The boy admitted, a distant look in his eyes. “Anyway, I’d been walking and walking for such a long time that I thought I’d pass out. So I stole your rice ball. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay now.” Yun waved off the apology.

“I’ve never tasted anything so delicious before!” The boy praised.

“I guess it can’t be helped. Want this rice cake?” Yun pulled out the mentioned rice cake.

“Our emergency rations…” Jaeha quietly pointed out, his voice at the edge of a whine that was better suited to Zeno.

“Zeno thinks the lad’s punishing us.” He whispered back, as the boy continued. “I found out that Kouka has good food and great women!”

“Hear that Hak? He said I’m a great woman!” Yona repeated eagerly, happy to hear the words for a change.

Even knowing everyone traveling with her felt the same, it was nice to hear the sentiment voiced, and not just felt and expressed in deed.

“Yeah, cuz you shot down a bird and gave it to him.” Hak countered, still jealous of the kid for no real reason.

“Thank you for the food.” And not beating me up when I asked Yona? to marry me. “I should get home, before my father and the others get too worried.”

“Won’t it be dangerous for you? There’s a border patrol nearby, with the market here in the village and the mines to the east.” Jaeha asked, quietly willing to give the boy ride over the river.

“It wasn’t too bad earlier—“ His words were cut off as Shin-ah body slammed everyone, sending them to the ground.

“Seiryuu’s saying to hide!” Zeno chirped, squished between Jaeha, Yona, and Hak.

“Words, Shin-ah, words.” Kija grumbled.

“At the border…there’s soldiers gathering.”

“Huh? Why?!” The boy asked, a touch panicked.

“There were nowhere near that many when I left! And Fire isn’t near here, is it?” The boy questioned, only vaguely familiar with how Kouka was divided up into Tribes.

“It’s not. What’s going on?” Hak wondered out loud. *So he really is going to take back Prince Yuhon’s old province…if it was because of Kum-ji’s actions they wouldn’t be this far inland…*

“If they’re here to help at the mines, then there shouldn’t be trouble.” Jaeha suggested. “Though if that was the case, they shouldn’t be that close to the river.”

“What do I do? I…I can’t go home now…” The boy seemed on the edge of tears, as his youthful adventure turned into something decidedly less fun and more dangerous.

Southern Kai and Kouka were currently neutral, and there were ‘river hoppers’ (as the term went) all the time, but the more soldiers in the area, the less kindly they took to river hoppers, even boys on youthful adventure.

“Jaeha, is there a path somewhere nearby?” Yona asked, the order coming through in her voice.

“Hmm…if it’s a path you want, then it’s a path I’ll find.” Jaeha agreed, turning to do just that.

“What’s your name?” Yona (finally) asked the boy.

“Kalgan.”

“Don’t worry Kalgan. We’ll get you back home, as long as that’s okay with you.” She told him with a smile.

“Does this mean you’re coming to be my bride?” Kalgan asked, reaffixing his fascination on her.

“NO WAY!!!” Hak, Kija, and Yun all chorused, as Yona bit her lip, trying not to laugh.

“Next time, everyone who’s not Yona-chan or Yun can find their own way over.” Jaeha declared once he was done ferrying everyone across the river. “Hak and Shin-ah were really heavy…”

Thankfully, Kija had been able to throw the packs across, save for Yun’s cooking supply one. “Did Ryokuryuu’s old back crack under the strain?” Zeno teased.

Jaeha choked on air and froze. “That was fun; we need to do it again.” Hak said loudly, unfreezing Jaeha. “No we don’t!”

Hak laughed. *No wonder Hime-san likes when Droopy Eyes takes her ‘flying’!*

Watching the exchange, Yona just smiled. The tinge of sadness was still gone, even with the recent encounter with Su-won.

Suddenly Kalgan’s face was right in front of her, unsettling close. “Gah!” She jumped.

“You watch that guy a lot.” Kalgan noted, almost unnecessarily.

“He’s my fiancé, so why wouldn’t I?” She reminded him.

Kalgan looked dubious as Hak came up behind her. “I’m not the troublemaker, so you should be watching out for yourself more, Hime-san.” He spoke, right next to her ear.
Yona only just contained her jump. *Why am I so jumpy? There was definitely a change in the air, when Jaeha crossed the river, but I shouldn’t be nervous because of that. As Crown Princess, I and everyone travelling with me has diplomatic immunity, so we’re not edging war by crossing the border.* “You mean you don’t like me watching you as closely as you watch me?” She countered, faking an innocent blink.

Hak could tell she was on edge over something, but he didn’t want to bring it up in front of Kalgan.

As everyone moved further away from the river, Yona looked back with a frown. *I feel...itchy, like something is bothering me. I can tell this isn’t my land, and that’s setting me on edge. While Kin Province has been bouncing between Kouka and the Kai Empire for centuries, that didn’t start until long after him-me’s time. Maybe that’s why I’m so edgy…*

Groaning, Kalgan found himself awake in the dead of night, his bladder prodding him awake. Hauling himself to his feet, he walked a short distance into the bushes to take care of business. As he finished, the sounds of footsteps caught his attention.

“Really Hak? You’re jealous?”

Peeking out of the bushes, he saw Hak and Yona in a small clearing. “I’m not saying I’m jealous; you are.” Hak protested, kind of half-heartedly to Kalgan.

“I thought you wanted to show me off, to everyone who thought I was a foolish girl?” There was the undercurrent of…something…as Yona stuck her hand in his robes (or so it seemed). “I keep count, you know.”

“Of what?”

“Of the women who undress you with their eyes as you pass. The extra pound of rice or tofu when Yun hauls you along with him shopping. The way they follow us, making moon eyes at you. They’re too busy bemoaning their luck that you’re taken to glare at me, if they notice me at all. The part of me that isn’t preening over the attention my mate is getting wants to chase them away.” There was something in her eyes that made Kalgan’s face grow hot, and her tone of voice made his pants tighten for some reason.

“Like you have anything to worry about, my gorgeous fire goddess.” Hak replied, and the nickname Kalgan would usually regard as cheesy and overdone seemed right. “As much as I want to show you off, I don’t want anyone else realizing just how breathtaking you are.” This last sentence, Kalgan had to strain to hear.

“Maybe if you said the words more often…”

“Talk is cheap, when I can show you…” Hak claimed Yona’s mouth, hands on her waist as she buried her fingers in his hair.

*Wait...so what Hak’s really good at is…?* It hit Kalgan just what Yona had meant earlier. *Oh crud, I actually told her to come and have a roll in the hay with me?! How am I still alive?!* His face still burning, he darted back to his ‘spot’, not caring how loud he made the bushes rustle.

Not that the couple actually heard anything.

“Ah, to be young and naïve again, discovering the wonder that is sex.” Shuten waxed poetic.

“You were naïve once?” Guen questioned with a dubious look, Abi with the same expression on his
“I was younger than that brat, but there was actually a time when I didn’t know about sex.” Shuten asserted.

“Shuten, before you were born doesn’t count.” Kaya pointed out teasingly. “But have you noticed how the air seems different?”

“So it’s not just me.” Abi remarked. “It seems the river gorge forms more of a border than first meets the eye. We’ve left the dragon’s blessing.”

“So what’s that mean for us? And them?” Guen asked, jerking a thumb at the sleeping group.

“I know there’s no way they wouldn’t take Kalgan back to his village, but I hope they hurry back across the river once they do. I’m not liking this whole situation.” Shuten admitted. “Between whatever effects being outside Kouka has and whatever the Su-won brat is planning to do in Kin…”

“We can at least hope some of the people in Awa who had loved ones sold by Kum-ji will learn what happened to them, and be able to welcome them home.” Kaya prayed. Zeno hasn’t had to fight seriously yet, but if being outside Kouka affects the others that much, he won’t have a choice about… please, keep Zeno and everyone safe…Ouryuu-kami…

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter I’ll establish the rules of the dragon’s blessing as it functions in this story. Shorter than normal, especially with how long it’s been since the last chapter, but this is a good stopping point, since the upcoming scenes are kind of long, and a definite action change.
“Sorry about my father.” Kalgan apologized, as Hak and Yona set up their tents some distance from the village. Jaeha, Shin-ah, Zeno, and Yun were with Kija at Kalgan’s house. “I had no clue he would act like that.”

“It’s alright Kalgan.” Yona assured him with a calm she didn’t feel. “At least Kija can spend the night in a real bed. Not everyone is welcoming of strangers.”

“Still doesn’t mean I get it.” Kalgan complained. “They never talk about Kouka, or all the people they have to know there, but they’re always looking across the river. I mean, I kind of get why Father says it doesn’t matter if the land belongs to Kouka or Kai, but that doesn’t mean that he or the others should be so suspicious! All of you are Kouka citizens!”

“It might have something to do with something that happened when the village was last a part of Kouka.” Hak suggested, eyeing Yona out of the corner of his eye.

A memory itched in the back of his mind, of a man who traveled below his station, to judge the nature of the people and how they treated strangers. Of his rage, on behalf of those denied any kind of hospitality because of illness or prejudice, all starting with a kind woman who plucked a baby with fire hair out of the reeds and made him her own.

“Well, I’ll try and sneak some food to you guys out here; it’s the least I can do after you guys fed me before.” Kalgan told them. “Now I got a mountain of chores to do, since I skipped out earlier.” He darted off, trying to figure out why he had been scared. Was it because Yona was angry? It felt like that time I saw that wolf stalking the herds. Not that she was obviously angry…

Once Kalgan was out of sight, Yona let out a strangled scream of frustration. Hak froze, and started edging towards the stash of her favorite sweets he had gotten in Awa. Thankfully, he hadn’t had to plead his case to Yun about the expense, even if the cost was more a result from the amount he bought than the item itself. “I know Father is the one who gave back Kin after Uncle died, but Uncle’s actions must have something to do with the village’s attitude! And everything feels wrong! The land, the air—it’s like I’m wrapped in canvas! And Kija shouldn’t be sick! Or Jaeha tired after carrying all of us! My brothers blessed the land when—” Yona’s tirade cut off as she realized something.

She seized Yun’s bag, digging through it. “Uhh…” Hak cautiously said as Yona pulled out the map with a cry of triumph. “What is it?” He asked, peering over her shoulder.

“My brothers blessed the land. They blessed Kouka. We’re not in Kouka, not today’s Kouka and not him-me’s Kouka.” She breathed, trancing the borders of Kouka in Hiryuu’s time. They were mostly the same, except the lower third of Sen Province was part of Kouka in Hiryuu’s time.

Still clutching the map, she darted off, leaving Hak alone in the barely set up camp, confused. “Care to explain?” He asked Abi.

“When the Dragon Gods created the Dragon Warriors, they cast a blessing over the whole kingdom, centered on Hiryuu Castle. It boosts our power, since by all rights, powers such as ours aren’t meant to exist in this plane of reality.” He explained. “Being bound to Hiryuu-sama boosts it more; without
a master to serve, Dragon Warriors don’t live much past thirty or thirty five years old.”

“Huh; no wonder Droopy Eyes freaks out when you call him ‘old’.” Hak noted to himself, setting Yun’s bag to rights, if not quite to the way Yun kept it.

Yona came across Yun by the village well. “How is everyone?” She asked.

“Kija’s stable; I gave him some fever reducer, so hopefully with that and some rest it’ll break.” He told her, filling his bucket.

“I’ll take it; I realized something I need to share with them, and I kind of left Hak to finish the camp when I realized it.” She admitted sheepishly, taking the bucket.

Nodding, Yun departed for their camp.

Kalgan’s house was near the well. As she approached the door, she heard Jaeha speaking. “…was twenty five, when I was born. Ever since I hit that age, I wake up every day, expecting to feel my power slipping away.”

She froze, mouth halfway open to greet everyone. “This is only the second time we’ve had a master. The first generation outlived Hiryuu-ou-sama, but after centuries of living and dying young…it might make a difference.” Kija pointed out.

She knew that the Hakuryuu, Seiryuu, and Ryokuryuu between him-her’s warriors and hers’ lived an average of thirty or so years.

She also had spent the most time in this life with Ouryuu, the one warrior will never grow old and die.

She spent all of her time thinking of everyone staying much as they are that she never considered the burden generations of short lives would have.

Of how growing old wasn’t even an option, because they wouldn’t live long enough to see it.

“He was a stubborn bastard though; he didn’t die until I was twelve and he was nearly forty. So I might have time left.”

“Yona?” Shin-ah was in front of her, gently taking the bucket from her.

“Hime-sama…” Kija said as she knelt at his side, dazed. Everyone huddled around the two of them, and she realized she had started crying. “None of you are dying anytime soon.” She said fiercely.

“Yona-chan…history might work against us here.” Jaeha pointed out gently.

“They all lived to see their sixties; all of you will see that too. Bound to a master, your souls don’t carry the burden of divine power in the mortal realm alone. That’s why all the ones between them and you died young; the power isn’t natural to this realm. Even with the blessing my brothers did.” She explained, blinking fiercely.

“Blessing?” Shin-ah asked.

“When they created the Dragon Warriors, they blessed all of Kouka, anchoring the blessing on Hiryuu Castle. It takes some of the burden of bearing the power off of you, keeping you strong.” She gestured with the map. “I didn’t realize it when we went to Senri Village, because at the time the blessing was cast, that part of Sen was a part of Kouka. But Kin Province didn’t begin hopping
between Kai and Kouka until the second or third dynasty; so the blessing doesn’t reach that far. The river makes the border sharper; I think that’s why you were tired after carrying all of us over, Jaeha. But, I don’t think that you’re sick directly because of that though, Kija.”

“No?” He asked.

“You could have been carrying your illness for some time before now; it just didn’t affect you until you lost the support of the blessing.” She rubbed her eyes, checking the wolf, cat, moon, and sun in her heart.

Everyone’s core was strong, even if the wolf, cat, and moon seemed weak and dim. The sun was withdrawn from the group, a situation reflected in real life.

“If this is something Kija already had, maybe you should keep your distance.” Jaeha gently prodded.

She shook her head. “I’m irritable and uncomfortable, being out of the blessing, but that’s it. It doesn’t give me strength the same way it does all of you. Still, we shouldn’t linger, either way.”

“You got that right; I haven’t felt this unwelcome in years, even if the only times I left the hut were during escape attempts.” Jaeha muttered in agreement.

Shin-ah nodded in agreement, Zeno observing everyone with a closed off expression, despite the smile on his face.

“So what is the official stance regarding Yona-hime?” Guen-tae asked, once it was just him, Su-won, and Ju-do in the command tent.

While their arrival had been delayed by the arrival of a reply from Southern Kai, which basically said that they didn’t care about Kouka’s complaints, this was the first time Guen-tae had gotten the king alone (save for Ju-do).

Ju-do froze as Su-won weighted his answer. “…she is my Heir, and is free to move and act as she wishes. Anything regarding her or anyone she is traveling with that comes from Advisor Kei-shuk is not to be trusted without independent verification, even if My Name is associated with it.” He finally replied. Especially if My Name is attached to it. I can’t rule out Kei-shuk doing something that radical, even if I’ve refused to discuss Yona with him.

Ju-do glanced at Guen-Tae, worried. Yes, Earth’s loyalty was not easily gained or lost, but it was his job to worry.

Guen-Tae noticed the worry. “Hold your tigers Ju-do; she ran into my wife when she visited Awa, and thus ran into me. They are cousins through the late Queen, after all.”

Ju-do scowled at the reminder of how his horse had had to wear those stinky pelts, as Su-won blinked. “I knew Yun-ho-san is of the Kashi clan, but I wasn’t aware of how close the relation was between them. So they’ve met?”

“That much use of the words ‘cute’ and ‘adorable’ should be illegal…be very, very glad you didn’t overhear any part of their dinner conversation.” Guen-Tae hid his face at the memory. “The squirrel just made it worse.”

It took the other two a moment, but then they did remember the squirrel that had been perched on Yona or Lili throughout their encounter. “I can imagine…” Su-won commented, picturing the squirrel in his mind.
He wanted to ask how she was, and how Hak was, given the injuries they had gotten in Water, but the words stuck in his throat. *Would she have risked telling General Guen-Tae the truth? Of That Night? What would she have told either of them?*

Guen-Tae, reading the buried worry in his king’s eyes, answered the question unasked. “Her men mentioned an injury she suffered, but it didn’t bother her when I tested what Hak had taught her. He’s taught her well, and it’s a pity her father never permitted her to learn weapons during his lifetime; she appears to be a quick study.” *Or rather, she only had to learn the limits of her present body, and the changes in reach and balance. I’d love to hear one day what she does remember. Or speak to him directly; Hak seemed to imply that Hiryuu-ou still exists in some fashion as a person separate from Yona-hime.*

“And you actually survived pointing a weapon at her?” Ju-do muttered.

“…may I ask where you would stand? If…” Su-won trailed off, suggestively.

”…as a person, my loyalty is yours.” Guen-Tae said after several minutes. “As a Tribe…I cannot side with either of you. Not when both of you have aided the Tribe. Unless she openly makes a stand against you, Earth is yours to command.” Bowing, he departed the tent.

Su-won let his head hit the table. “You think she planned this, or is making this up as she goes along?” He asked.

At present, he had Sky and she had Wind. Earth has basically just declared themselves neutral. With Fire and Water, while he had the loyalty of their generals, she had made important connections with the heirs of those generals, so they could not be fully relied on.

“Either she’s thinking ten moves ahead, or has a lot of luck.” Ju-do agreed.

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Morning brought new problems. Besides the gathering storm of Su-won’s invasion, Jaeha’s collapse the night before meant that Kalgan’s father, Amoi, was no longer willing to let some of them stay in his house.

Yona stormed out before she did something she regretted. She was missing the hinged doors of the castle, that one could fling open and slam close, conveying anger. *I know Jaeha and Kija agreed with Kalgan’s father about leaving, but that doesn’t mean I like it. Not when he’s withdrawing sanctuary.*

The commotion of the villagers distracted her. “There’s troops gathering! Kouka will be engaging Kai’s army soon!” The bearer of the news yelled.

“Is it because of the new king?”

“It doesn’t matter; it’s not like the king and the important generals are the ones being trampled; it’s us.”

_It doesn’t matter that Awa may be able to learn the fates of the people Kum-ji sold. Not when his primary reason is to take back what Father gave away, and reclaim a legacy from Uncle._ Clenching her fists, she jumped when her hands were suddenly wet. Her fingernails had broken skin and drawn blood.

Then Hak was in front of her, cradling her hands in his as he surveyed the cuts. He gently kissed each cut, licking away the blood. “Being outside Kouka’s really getting to you, huh?” He whispered.
“Yeah…the river is acting like a spiritual knife, cutting off the blessing instead of it gradually decreasing in strength, like it would if this was Xing or Sen Province.” She explained, letting Hak take her to camp. “I never noticed how much it affected me until it wasn’t there anymore. At least I’ll know for the future.”

“Shin-ah’s collapsed too.” Yun told them when they arrived. “I wonder why you haven’t collapsed yet Zeno?”

“Zeno’s body is sturdy, remember? It’s his one strong point! So he can’t get sick.” He explained, an element of fake cheer in his voice.

“Oh now you can’t get sick either? Really not liking you Zeno.” Jaeha said, sticking his head out of the tent. “Gah, my head…”

Shouldering her quiver, Yona went to put her anger to more constructive use.

“Yona’s angry…” Shin-ah remarked, huddled next to Kija, utterly miserable.

For a trio of men who had never been sick before, the three dragons were being good patients, all else considered.

That is to say, they were all like a trio of five year olds. “How is everyone~?” Zeno sing songed, bearing broth.

“We’re a tent full of sick guys with no pretty girl to nurse us back to health; we’re in hell.” Jaeha tried to deadpan, but his head was pounding too much for his voice to properly pull it off.

“Zeno could put on one of the Miss’s dresses?” He suggested. “But the boy’s father did a major no-no, telling you to get out of his house even though you’re sick. That’s why she’s angry.”

“But we agreed to leave…” Kija brought up.

“Hiryuu-ou had very strong views on hospitality and sanctuary. Casting ill men out of one’s home used to be a hanging offense, in his day. His adoptive mother had a lot to do with his views. Being cut off from the castle and its blessing isn’t helping either.” Zeno explained.

“Is that…in the stories passed down in Ouryuu Village?” Kija asked, curious. “I’ll have to let my village know…I don’t remember hearing that.”

“Just rest and focus on the Miss’s presence. It should help boost your immune systems to fight this off.” Zeno chided gently, tucking first Shin-ah, then Kija, back in, returning the cloths to their foreheads.

Something about the way Zeno was smiling stirred something in both of them. “…nostalgic…” Shin-ah whispered, Kija groaning in agreement.

“Rest, and if you need anything, Zeno’ll come flying.” He repeated,

“You? Still got…way to go…” Kija retorted, doing as Zeno had suggested and focusing on Yona’s torch. There was a flare of excitement, of success…

Zeno surveyed his brothers in arms and his nephews in blood. “I will definitely protect all of you. For all the times I couldn’t protect them.” He vowed, and there was a tug inside as Ouryuu-kami agreed.
Stepping outside, he eyed the sky. “The battle’s over…but there’s malice in the air…” He noted.

“None of this feels good…” Shuten agreed, eyeing the sky with him. “You gonna be okay, fighting in front of them?”

Zeno eyed him. “Who are you and what have you done with Shuten? Since when do you ask after me on the battlefield?”

The serious look in Shuten’s eyes took him aback. “The first time I watched you get dismembered, it was right after I died, and I found myself throwing up everything in my ghost belly.” He admitted. “Not when you got diced up, but when you came back together. I would never wish that on Kim-don, let alone a kid like you started out as.”

Shuten could have knocked Zeno over with a feather, given how poleaxed he looked. “For you to say something like that…” Zeno shifted uncomfortably. “In the end, it doesn’t matter, if I’m okay with it. As long as I can protect them, and be the shield I never got to be for all of you…”

The pair stood outside the tent, watching the reddening sky, and tried not to be reminded of blood reddening the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Yona’s making it up as she goes Su-won, because I’m making this up as I go along.
“Hey Yona?” Kalgan asked that evening, having eaten dinner with them instead of his house. “Can you tell me the birth myth of Kouka?”

“You’ve never heard it before?” Yun questioned.

“Not really. Just that the first king of Kouka was supposed to have been a dragon god or something. None of the adults like talking about Kouka, even myths.” Kalgan explained, shifting. “I wanna hear it properly.”

“Well, if he wants ‘proper’, he certainly asked the right person.” Guen noted, and everyone, living and dead, gathered close or pricked an ear up as Yona began, the sense of ages wrapping around her.

“Long ago, the Crimson Dragon God was curious about humans, and, wanting to experience life as a human, descended from Heaven and took on human form. Found and raised by a minor king and queen, as an adult he united the warring provinces, achieving with strength of arms, force of will, and genuine nature what others had failed to do with either strength of arms or force of will alone.

‘But not everyone rejoiced in his success, as his success meant peace and rule of law. By cruel trick, they stormed his castle and took him prisoner. Just as he was about to be executed, divine light burst through the clouds. His fellow Dragon Gods, the White Dragon God, the Blue Dragon God, the Green Dragon God, and the Yellow Dragon God, had come to end his time on Earth, and punish humans for daring to try and kill their brother.

‘But if he permitted them that, the now-mortal Crimson Dragon, Hiryuu, knew all humanity would be slaughtered for the crimes of a few. So he refused. ‘I, too, am human now. Even if they hate me, and betray me, I cannot help but love them, not only the ones near and dear to my heart, but all of them.’ He told them.

‘His Dragon brothers knew they could not force the issue, but they could not bear to leave their brother unguarded on Earth again. So, each choose a person who had made an impression on the Crimson Dragon God. With their blood, they granted four people some of their power, to protect their brother. White’s gift was an arm with the strength of the Heavens, Blue’s gift were eyes that saw all under Heaven, Green’s gift was a leg that could reach the Heavens, and Yellow’s gift was a body that could not be destroyed by anything under Heaven.’

(Hak and Jaeha noted there seemed to be an odd note to Yona’s voice as she described the ‘gift’ of the Yellow Dragon God)

‘You are now Our other Halves. With Hiryuu as your master, protect him, love him, and never betray him, for as long as you live!’ Thus the blood bond was sealed. Each Dragon Warrior, along with the Crimson Dragon God, founded one of the five Tribes of Kouka.

‘Time passed, and the Crimson Dragon God could no longer stay alive in human form, and he died. His bereft warriors did not know how much of their grief was because of the loss of someone dear to them, and how much was the result of the dragons’ blood mourning the death of the Crimson Dragon God. As their power was not one meant for this world, they scattered to the winds, to await the day the Crimson Dragon God returned to Earth.’"
Kalgan jumped once she stopped speaking, the spell of her words broken. “But how did they know the Crimson Dragon God would come back? And why would he come back?”

“It doesn’t really say, how they knew he would return, but I suppose he might have communicated something with them before his death. As for why…” Yona shrugged, and like when she was telling the tale, there was an ancient air about her. “It could be as simple as wanting to see the country he had nurtured at its birth again, or the reincarnations of the people he held dear to him during his life on Earth.”

Kalgan was quiet as he considered the story. “I don’t get why everyone keeps quiet about it; it’s a cool story! A lot better than other stories about gods that I’ve heard, cuz in those stories, the gods don’t seem to care about humans, but the Crimson Dragon God does.”

Yona smiled at him, and Kalgan found himself blushing at how breathtakingly beautiful she looked. “It’s said that the Crimson Dragon God sparked a sense of self inside humans, so it’s no wonder that he cares about them.” She said, the ancient air about her retreating until she was like any other girl.

“You know that you don’t have to travel around helping people as atonement, right?” Hak asked that night in bed. “No one in their right mind would expect a kid to make any kind of major decision or impact, right? And as much as I hate to say this…His Majesty’s fate may have been sealed since Prince Yuhon’s death.”

She stiffened. “…you won’t change my feelings on the matter.” She finally said. “Father…he may have promised Uncle that he would let Su-won kill him, but that doesn’t mean he couldn’t have told him the truth.”

Part of her wondered if she should tell him about how Su-won was started on his path by Ju-do and his suspicions when he found Uncle’s body, but her gut said it wasn’t something she should reveal yet. Hak had a big enough target on his back, being a major threat to Su-won’s personal safety. He didn’t need to add to that by setting his sights on Ju-do as well.

Closing her eyes, she pressed a hand to the earth. She could tell the moment Su-won won the battle; even though he murdered a crowned king, he was now a crowned king himself, acknowledged by the people of the land and the gods he didn’t believe in. The land lost its sharp sense of other, and she could feel the blessing beginning to spread into Kin.

She may not agree with what he had done, or be happy with its people, but now that Kin Province was once again of Kouka, she would fight for it and its people the way she would any other of Kouka’s lands.

The river was still an obstacle to overcome, and that was slowing the blessing down. That did nothing to ease the hole in her stomach, on edge and waiting for something to happen.

It was a rough night for everyone. At some point, just at the start of the predawn, Shin-ah had started throwing up, setting off Kija and Jaeha. So their collective tolerance took a sharp dive, and they were now a trio of two years olds. “Kill me now…” Jaeha groaned between heaves, Yona holding back his hair.

Hak had gone to offer his help to the villagers, the mandatory gaggle of girls trailing behind, so thankfully she didn’t have to try maintaining some kind of peace. “No dying.” She scolded. “You’ve never thrown up before?”
“…a couple times as a little kid? It’s not the throwing up it’s the nausea.” Jaeha said, Shin-ah and Kija making noises of agreement.

Between Yun, Yona, and Zeno, they got the other three back in bed. “My standard fever reducer isn’t working…” Yun fretted. “I’m not sure what this could be.”

“It’s not plague or pox or a cold. Maybe flu?” Zeon suggested, arms crossed behind his head. “Definitely not consumption.”

“If they could at least keep something down, then I could give them something for the nausea…” Yun thumbed through his book. “I’d love to go talk to an apothecary, but I don’t want to leave them alone. If they’ve started throwing up then it’s only a matter of time before the other end joins the ‘fun’.”

“We didn’t need to know that!” Kija protested, breaking out into a coughing fit that he only just managed to stop before throwing anything else up.

“Zeno will go to the next town and ask. Will you go with Zeno, Kalgan?” Zeno asked the nearby tree.

A sheepish Kalgan edged out of hiding. “I think I gave them something I had, cuz remember how tired I’d been? Both Kija and Jaeha carried me. I couldn’t say anything in the village, or my father would start off on how I must have gotten it across the river…”

“The merchants will accept rin, right?” Yona asked, handing her money pouch to Zeno.

“Yeah.” Kalgan replied.

“I wonder why the rest of you aren’t sick too? Though that would be a miserable time if all of you were sick in a strange country.” Kalgan contemplated out loud as he and Zeno were walking to the next town.

“Eh, Zeno’s very sturdy. It’s his one strong point.” Zeno deflected. “Has your father or the other adults ever said why they don’t like Kouka very much?”

“Not really. I was like, five, when Kin was given back to Kai. I remember the day we got the announcement. There was a lot of yelling, and I think a couple people were beaten up, but I don’t remember if they were villagers or officials. But everyone felt betrayed, like all the promises of protection and aid were meaningless.” Kalgan remembered. “At least, that’s my memory of it.”

“It was very complicated, the stuff that led to Kin being given to Kai.” Zeno noted. Why would I not be surprised if it involved Yuhon committing war crimes like he did with the Xing prisoners?

“Hmmm…” The old man at the apothecary hummed as Zeno recited the symptoms and the order in which they appeared. “Yes I know what this is. Normally only children catch it, but the few adults who display symptoms always have a rough time of it. This—” He pulled out three small bundles, placing them into one bag. “—will reduce the fever and help with the headaches. Each bundle is two doses; if you give the first dose at dawn, the second dose must be given at dusk. Two doses should be enough for your friend’s normal fever reducer to take care of any remaining symptoms.”

Handing the bag to Kalgan, the old man waved off the money pouch Zeno held out to him. “I was one of those unlucky few adults to have caught it; after suffering through that myself I can’t bring myself to charge any other unfortunate souls.”
Suddenly there was screaming and yelling and pounding hooves. Kalgan peeked out. “Soldiers?!” He whispered harshly.

Zeno peeked out briefly too. “That’s Kai armor. Looks like the defeated army is taking out their rage on the people they were once protecting, scorching the earth to deny Kouka anything.” He said, the expression on his face making Kalgan shiver.

“Quick, out the back!” The old man ushered the pair to the back of his shop. “You’re both young enough to have a chance at running.”

“What about you?” Kalgan asked, worried.

“If they bother this old man Imma give ‘em hell. My wife always said I’m too stubborn to die.” Shoving them outside, the sounds of him barring the doors and windows faded into the general cacophony of the raid as Kalgan and Zeno started running.

“The blessing is slowly spreading into Kin, but right now I don’t think it’s helping them.” Yona told Yun.

“Well, any illness has to get worse before it can get better.” Yun remarked. “But so far they’ve kept the broth down, which is something…”

Leaving Yun and the others, Yona began walking around the edge of the village. “KALGAN!!! WHERE ARE YOU?” Kalgan’s mother yelled. “Have you seen my son?” She asked as Yona approached.

“My friend asked him to show him where the next town was, so he could get medicine for the others.” Yona replied, somewhat neutrally.

“…how are they doing?” Kalgan’s mother cautiously asked.

“Like a trio of two year olds. None of them have ever really been sick like this before.” Yona answered with a slight smile.

“Men are all the same, aren’t they? If it’s a cut needing stitches they’ll say they’re fine, but as soon as they’re coughing and sneezing they turn into big babies.” Kalgan’s mother noted with a laugh. “Well, once Kalgan’s back with your friend, can you tell him I was looking for him?”

Nodding, Yona continued on. Not far away were the fields under fallow, stretching into uncultivated land. Suddenly the sun in her heart, which had been too far away for her to feel much from, began pulsing danger and panic. Tensing, she scanned the horizon, when she spotted two running figures. Who were being chased by a soldier on horseback. Notching an arrow, she didn’t have to think before she fired. Practice or luck meant the arrow slammed into an eye, sending the rider sliding off his horse, dead. “ZENO! KALGAN!” She yelled, running towards them and meeting them halfway.

“Kai soldiers are taking out their defeat on the people, to deny Kouka anything.” Zeno explained, almost unnecessarily.

“Warn the village. I’ll—“ Suddenly there were more soldiers bearing down on them, and then Hak was between the soldiers and them, cutting the soldiers down.

“Damn…Kouka…! If Kin Province…is going to be part of Kouka…then it might as well burn!!!” One soldier, barely clinging to life, cursed with his last breath.
The horizon filled with soldiers and horses, rage and hate and grief rising, gaining speed as it approached the shores of the innocent. How can one battle cause this reaction? Yona wondered, a question that had haunted him-her ages ago. He might think he was magnanimous in sparing them, but I’d sooner slaughter the whole army if I even suspected that they would turn on civilians.

“Hime-san, take Yun and Zeno and the dying idiots and run. I’ll stop this,” Hak said, voice just shy of an order.

“You can’t! Not alone!” Yona protested. “I can fight! I—”

Whirling around, Hak cut her words off with a deep kiss. “Any other time, I would agree and let you. But not with the idiots down for the count. Unless Zeno’s willing to break neutrality, it would just be the two of us. And I don’t trust a group this large in this situation. Someone still has to protect the idiots.” He whispered against her mouth.

He was right, and she knew it. “If you die, I’m following you to the Afterlife and killing you myself.” She promised.

“Now, how is that supposed to tempt me into staying alive?” He teased, turning back to face the oncoming hoard as Yona, Zeno, and Kalgan ran.

“Zeno! Take Kalgan and warn the village! Then help Hak!” She ordered, a foul taste in her mouth.

There was only one way Zeno could help Hak out there, and she hated herself for not giving him a choice.

“HAI!” Pausing briefly to get Kalgan on his back, Zeno split off from her, running to the village as she ran back to their camp.

“YUN!!” She screamed once she was close enough for him to hear her. “Wake the others, we need to run—!” Ripping the flap open, she stared at empty bedrolls, dread filling her.

“Yona?”

Yun’s voice reminded her that Yun didn’t know yet. “Kai soldiers are attacking the towns and villages in revenge for their loss. Hak’s buying time in front of the village; Zeno went with Kalgan to warn the village. I was going to help you move the others and then go back to support Hak…” Turning aside, Yona showed Yun the empty tent. “…but they’ve gone to help Hak.”

Paling, Yun grabbed a bag whose contents he had been hoping to never need. Lifting the flap, he showed her the contents. “Smoke bombs…?”

“More dangerous than that. I’ve been working on something that will explode on impact with the ground and not need a flame to set it off, but I’m not quite there yet. But these will damage the eyes at minimum,” He explained as they ran back to where she had left Hak. “I have a slingshot too, so I should be able to launch them far enough from us that we won’t be affected.”

Zeno did a quick survey of the village, making sure everyone was evacuating. He had felt the others moving towards Hak. Even if the Miss had caught them before they slipped away, there’s no way she’d have gotten them to agree to run and hide. Only if they were unconscious. “Everyone’s clear.” He told Kalgan, who was loitering at the far edge of the village, his father trying unsuccessfully to pull him along with him. “I’m going back to help Mister.”

“What can a boy like you do?” Amoi asked.
The look in Zeno’s eye cut him to the core. “A damn sight more than any of you middle-aged men are willing to do.” With that, Zeno took off running.

“We’re too far from the castle for me to do anything without an injury. Ouryuu-kami whispered. Once our power triggers, I can boost the strength and speed.

So blitz run and get injured as bad as I can as quick as I can. The adrenaline rushing meant he had no time to be nervous or anxious about what was to come.

“Damnit brat lemme in!”

Jaeha swore under his breath at the appearance of his ancestor. “Not the time and what the hell do you mean?”

“If you let me possess you we’ll be able to fight at something resembling normal strength.” His ancestor explained. “I can’t do anything unless you agree!”

Before Jaeha could tell his ancestor where to shove that suggestion, rather inventive cursing drifted over the battlefield, in the voice of Kija’s ancestor. “Damnit his resistance is too strong, and now isn’t the time to get him to notice me!” The man swore, instead doing his best to affect Kija’s opponents and trip them up.

Shin-ah felt Abi’s hands on his shoulders. “Ready? I can give you a boost. It won’t be a lot…” Abi whispered in his ear.

Nodding slightly, Shin-ah pushed his mask to the side, catching a dozen men in his glance before it snapped back on him. Falling to the ground, he found that he could still move a little. “It seems that me helping you reduced the backlash…” Abi murmured.

“Yona-chan…” Jaeha whispered, feeling her torch hovering on the edge of the battlefield with Yun’s pale ghost presence next to her, Zeno’s sun speeding towards them and full of grim determination. “What are you up to Zeno?”

“You’ve wanted to know what fate has befallen Ouryuu, right?” His ancestor suddenly said, voice odd. “Well watch closely.”

Jaeha cleared enough breathing room around him and Hak to stare at his ancestor. “What are you talking about?” He demanded, not caring that Hak was paying attention.

“You can see the Monkeys Droopy Eyes?” Hak asked, and before Jaeha could turn the question back at Hak his ancestor continued.

“It’s a fate I would not wish on my worst enemy, let alone on one of my dragon brothers…”

As Zeno ran at the soldiers Yona realized why she couldn’t place the ‘small fire’ Zeno was dealing with in her dreams.

It hadn’t happened yet. “ZENO!!” She screamed, firing an arrow at a horse almost blindly, not noticing how it fell and sent its rider tumbling off over its head.

“MISS RUN!” Zeno yelled, leaping at another rider, only to be skewered on his sword.

The whole group froze. Only Yona knew how his ‘desperate’ actions were deliberate, to receive
enough damage to trigger his power.

The soldier tossed Zeno off of his sword, slicing up through his left shoulder. Zeno’s blood splattered on her face as he landed next to her, seemingly dead.

*It had been a wound like this one, hadn’t it? Where Zeno had first begun to realize the full consequences of his power…* Yona pulled at his sash and scarf, trying to take his robe and jacket off, barely aware of how she chanted ‘wakeupwakeupwakeup’ at ever increasing volume.

Jaeha and Kija looked away. Jaeha was sure that whatever power kept Zeno from being poisoned or getting drunk or aging could not save him from being cut through the heart. Kija found himself full of guilt, thick enough to choke on. *Why didn’t you nag him more about training his power?! Why didn’t you think of a way of bringing it up that would have enticed him to actually train?! Then maybe he’d still be…*

“Clinging to a corpse won’t save you missy.” This far from Hiryuu Castle, Zeno might as well as be a corpse. She knew he had made contact with her yellow brother inside of himself, and her hope that it had perhaps let him overcome the constraints of the dragon’s blessing was shattered.

Shin-ah saw golden yellow inside of Zeno moving. Starting from his core, it spread through his body, and he saw unmoving systems start up again.

“…don’t cry…” His hand touched her cheek.

Blinking away tears that wouldn’t stop, she backed up enough to let him sit up. “Yeah, Hiryuu Castle’s too far…I’m healing slowly.” The sound of his flesh pulling back together was sickening, but she would not let herself vomit here.

Not in front of Zeno.

She pulled at his robes as he stood, and he looked back at her quizzically. “It’ll just be destroyed…might as well save what we can…” Clutching the clothes to her, she pressed her sword into his hand. “I’d tell you to be careful, but it doesn’t work that way…”

“What?” Kija breathed, trying to process the sight before him, never mind the implication that Yona knew about Zeno’s power. Well of course she does; she remembers being Hiryuu-ou-sama so naturally she’d remember what Ouryuu’s power was, even if it wasn’t used in that time…why didn’t I realize that before now?

“No.” He said simply, before turning to face the enemy, baffled that a dead man had risen. “Ouryuu cannot die.”

Shock and disbelief pulsed from the others around the sun inside. Yun just stared at Zeno, his logical mind trying to process how Zeno could be alive. *This is way beyond ‘super healing’!*

Hak took advantage of the distraction to strike down two more soldiers. *This is going to be bloodier than I ever thought to imagine. It’s one thing to know Zeno can recover from any wound; it’s another to actually see it…*

“I am the dragon born to be your shield. As long as your shield protects you…you will never be injured.” His cheerful and playful manner vanished into mist, and revealed the ancient warrior Ouryuu, human half of Ouryuu-kami. “I swore that to your mother as she died, on the bond that formed in this new life of yours…”
Chapter End Notes

...not even sorry...
"I-I cut him down! I know I did!" The soldier whose sword Zeno had been skewered on stuttered out.

"You were just seeing things!" One of his companions retorted (albeit with a sense of disbelief in his voice).

Peeking through his fingers, Yun winced as Zeno was stabbed in the heart, the soldier twisting the sword before pulling it out. "See! Now he’ll—"

There was that sound again, and Zeno’s chest was as it had been, with no hint of his injury beyond some stray blood. "How far does this go?" Yun whispered, clenching his hands in his clothes.

If Zeno was going to be slaughtered defending them, then the least Yun could do was watch his sacrifice.

"Farther than it ever should have. There have been many times where I cursed Yellow Brother." Yona whispered back, the odd doubling in her voice telling Yun that it was Hiryuu-ou answering his question.

"Ah shit, I hate this part." Shuten complained as Zeno’s arms were sliced off, the soldier wielding the sword raving at how Zeno’s revival was ridiculously impossible.

"Didn’t take you to be squeamish." Jaeha said, too shaken to attempt any kind of deadpan.

Then Zeno’s arm, the one holding Yona’s sword, was hovering in the air, poised to strike. It stabbed the soldier who had sliced off his arms, before going back to Zeno, as though it was being pulled.

“…never mind…” Jaeha swallowed hard as Zeno’s arm reattached. He could guess at why his ancestor hated seeing this, with as unsettled as he felt himself. *I wonder how many times he’s watched Ouryuu be sliced to pieces, only to be pulled together again?*

"If I’m terrifying enough, will you leave?" Zeno asked, in a voice that gave the others chills with how unlike his usual voice it was. "I have no strength of my own, so I can’t afford mercy. If you harm the Miss; no, if you harm any of them…I’m hitting your vitals."

That made the active fighters of the group—Hak, Jaeha, Kija, and Shin-ah, along with Guen and Shuten—outright shiver.

The first four had no doubt Zeno was telling the truth, while Guen and Shuten knew all too well the skill with which Zeno backed up his words.

“Zeno…” Yona whispered.

She knew it wasn’t enough.

He hadn’t taken enough damage yet.

Looking back as her, he flashed a closed eyed smile, warm and reassuring despite the surroundings. His other arm rejoining his body, Zeno ran at the soldiers, quickly killing two with stabs to the chest,
severing the arteries.

Shin-ah watched the golden light inside Zeno, boosting his strength and speed. It seemed to be floating just under his skin. “Beautiful and terrifying.” Abi said, and Shin-ah nodded in agreement.

Kija threw a wide-eyed glance at Hak and Jaeha. *I think Zeno has far more strength than he knows…and not just physical, with how he’s taking the injuries.* “Wait…he had been rushing the soldiers on purpose?” Kija said out loud. “So this would happen?”

“Looks that way.” Jaeha idly kicked a soldier trying to sneak up on an oblivious Kija, snapping the spine. *I should be more worried at how easy it is to aim to kill, if it meant saving any of them, not just Yona-chan…*

Then Zeno was surrounded, at least five swords stabbing into his torso, as a sixth sword swung at his neck. “STOP IT!/ZENO!” Yona and Yun screamed as Zeno’s head went flying and his body fell to the ground, no long held up by the swords stabbing him.

Hak had to look away, swallowing hard. True, he had seen some nasty injuries in training accidents, and that guy he saw gored by a wild boar when he was ten, but…

This was Zeno. Bright, cheerful, ancient Zeno, constantly poised to throw himself between them and the threat.

“See! No way he’s—“ Yun was glad that the uneven ground meant he couldn’t see just how Zeno’s head and body reunited.

“THIS ISN’T HAPPENING!!! WHY ARE YOU STILL ALIVE!!!” Zeno’s eyes were shadowed by his bangs as the soldier who had sliced his head off screamed this.

“…I’ve finally been able to see everyone. No matter what happens, or what you do to me…I will be everyone’s shield.” Zeno stated firmly. *I won’t be useless, this time…*

“SOMEONE—SOMEONE COME KILL THIS—“ An arrow to the throat cut off the man, Yona’s rage nearly a visible flame around her.

Thankfully, the attackers were too distracted by the impossibility that was Zeno to go after her.

One of them swung at Zeno’s head, aiming to cleave him in half. Despite himself, Kija flinched, looking away so he didn’t have to watch Zeno be cut in half.

Only he wasn’t.

There was a clang, almost like a sword hitting metal. Kija, Jaeha, and Hak had to blink hard, before they really believed that yes, Zeno was now covered in patches of golden scales. “…your blades can’t cut me anymore.” Zeno quietly told the man, the other dragons sighing in relief on hearing this.

Grabbing the sword, he casually snapped it in half, before ramming the hilt into the face of the former wielder, shattering the facial bones. With speed nearly too fast to track, two more men were struck down with blows to the head, before Zeno leapt like Jaeha, landing on a horse and rider, killing both when their spines snapped into pieces under the force.

This brought him close to Kija, Jaeha, and Hak, with Shin-ah only a little ways off. “Z-Zeno…” Kija whispered, staring at Zeno like he couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing. *This is what the stories call ‘an invulnerable body’? Not a body that cannot be damaged, but a body that can recover from any and every indignity and injury it could incur?*
“Hey, calm down. I’m alive.” Zeno assured him, looking in their direction but not quite meeting their gazes or looking at their faces. “I’m the oddball dragon, without any power, but…”

His disconnected glaze contemplated his hand. The distance from Hiryuu Castle meant that instead of taking a form much like Hakuryuu’s, there were scales on the back of his hand, leaving his palm bare, his power presenting as it had for centuries. “When this body is injured, it regenerates into steel. It gains speed and strength, like that of Ryokuryuu or Hakuryuu.”

This brief explanation of his power over, Zeno returned his attention to the few remaining marauding soldiers. “So what will you do? Unlike you, I have no limits, and can fight for hundreds of years.”

Despite his neutral face, there was still a shiver that went through everyone, regardless of side, as he challenged them. “So come at me; I’ve got all the time in the world.”

He barely finished speaking before the remaining soldiers, of which there was about seven to ten men, bolted. At least two had trails of wetness down their legs.

No one bothered giving chase. Catching sight of a familiar object, Zeno walked over and picked up his amulet. He hadn’t noticed it being cut off. The beads will turn up sooner rather than later…

“Zeno!” Yona called, as she and Yun ran towards him.

Looking her way, he smiled, bright and brittle, with closed eyes so he couldn’t see her face. “Miss, are you—“

He was cut off as Yona nearly tackled him, almost sending them to the ground. Then Yun and Kija and Shin-ah were hugging him, and now he was off balance enough, physically and emotionally, to send all of them to the ground. Jaeha and Hak hovered, practically touching the people pile, which, for them, amounted to joining in. “H-hey, all of you are injured…” Zeno managed to get out, completely baffled.

For the first time since he regenerated in front of them, he really looked at them and their expressions. There was a lump in his throat, as he took in the tears and genuine relief and concern for him. Smiling, tears pricked at his eyes as Ouryuu Zeno sagged into the arms of his family. “You’re all so adorable…”

It was some minutes before Yona was able to let go of Zeno. “Break camp. I want us across the river yesterday.” She said.

Mostly blank stares greeted the statement. “Miss…” Zeno prompted, and she realized she hadn’t spoken modern Koukan. Closing her eyes, she repeated her statement in modern Koukan, taking care to make sure she was using the right language. “I’ll go let Kalgan and the village know. Were you able to get any medicine?” She added.

“Yep.” Zeno confirmed, everyone letting go enough for him to stand. “Steal a boat?” He asked casually, making most of the group ogle him.

“We’ll bribe the owner with our emergency fund first; only steal one if no one is willing.” Yona replied, turning to walk back to the village.

There was a hint of tension between everyone, but there was no time for explanations. While Shin-ah and Kija had a couple slashes, they were, for the most part, mobile, so after quickly bandaging their wounds, Yun led the way back to their camp.
Yona encountered Kalgan, his parents, and the other villagers near the village center. Ignoring the muffled gasps at her appearance, splattered with Zeno’s blood, she spoke. “The soldiers won’t be troubling you or anyone else anymore.”

“Who were they?” A random man asked, only to shrink back as her harsh gaze landed on him.

“They were Kai, scorching the province in petty revenge for their defeat. Stragglers and deserters. With the son of Yuhon on the throne, what happened was only a matter of time.” She said, carefully speaking as to make sure that she spoke the right language.

“Where are the others?” Amoi asked.

“Breaking camp; we’ve lingered long enough. We were able to obtain medicine in the next town.” She replied. “Kalgan.”

“Yeah?” He questioned as she walked up to him.

“If any soldiers from Kouka come back, tell them that the crimson-haired girl has a message for Suwon. ‘The next time you decide to go off conquering, make sure the defeated army isn’t in a position to take their rage out on civilians.’” She ruffled his hair, with a smile that was both warm and sad. “Hopefully your next trip across the river will be more of a mundane adventure.”

With that, she turned and started walking away, back to camp.

“Why protect us?” Amoi called after her.

She paused.

What happened next would be talked about in Kalgan’s village for generations. A faint glow surrounded Yona, growing brighter as her form grew taller, resolving into the form of a man, wearing armor, long crimson hair waving slightly in the wind. “‘Even if they hate me, and betray me, I cannot help but love them. Not only the ones near and dear to my heart, but all of them.’”

His head turned, and he looked over his shoulder, a purple eye peering through crimson bangs. “I will not leave innocents to be slaughtered by those who were once their defenders. Not then, not now, not ever.”

The man—Hiryuu-ou—started walking, dissolving into warm crimson light to reveal Yona, her crimson hair a torch in the wind.

Stealing a boat, thankfully, was unnecessary. Kalgan’s village was near where the river widened out from a mountain stream. Between Zeno and Jaeha, they made it back across without incident.

The sun was low in the sky by the time they reached the campsite they had camped at the night before meeting Kalgan and crossing the river. It had only been a few days since then, but it felt like a lifetime ago.

As Yun gave Kija, Jaeha, and Shin-ah their first doses of the medicine Kalgan and Zeno had gotten (despite the visible improvement they all demonstrated once back in Kouka proper) and properly treated Kija and Shin-ah’s wounds, Hak and Zeno set up camp, and Yona took the chance to slip away to rinse the blood off and change her clothes. After helping carry everyone and everything over, Zeno had taken a quick dip in the river, rinsing most of the blood off.

Reaching the small creek nearby, Yona sat down and just stared at her reflection. Zeno’s blood was
still on her face. Dried and flaking, it itched, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to scrub her face raw just yet.

The day him-her had dreaded had finally come. The Shield of the King was finally able to take his place on the battlefield, and now she sat, stained with the evidence of how the Yellow Dragon God placed their physical safety so high as to send a piece of itself to be born human, to act as a human shield.

Everything caught up with her, and she just managed to turn her head away from the creek before she started throwing up, letting out all her disgust, her pain—Zeno’s pain—at the injuries inflicted, all her sorrow.

The sun was next to her, holding back hair that had grown long enough to brush her shoulders as she vomited and cried. Finally, she was dry-heaving and spitting out the taste of bile, and a water flask entered her hands.

Rinsing her mouth out, she finally looked at Zeno, in clean clothes and in the middle of having his scales smooth back out into skin. “I didn’t want you to think I was disgusted with you. Not when I’m disgusted for you.” She admitted quietly. “This…this is why him-me kept you away from battle…”

“I know.” He whispered, gently guiding her in washing his blood off her face. “Mister and the others were getting worried; you’d been gone for a while now.”

“How is everyone?” She asked, Zeno turning away as she changed, mostly out of respect, given the complete lack of erotic feeling between them.

“Only the lad and Mister are still awake. The others barely stayed awake for the lad to get some rice cakes in them. So the questions will come in the morning.” He replied, carrying her pack as they walked back. “Guen said that Ha-Kija has enough of the past Hakuryuu off of him to see him and the others.”

“That’s good. I had worried that he’d never be able to see them.” She remarked.

Su-won glanced over the reports coming in from the villages, of the damage caused by the stragglers from South Kai’s army, pausing at the last one when he noticed it related how most of the stragglers were themselves slaughtered. “?” With an inquiring noise, he picked it up to read properly.

“‘Strange men stopped the stragglers, fighting like beasts. They were not ordinary men, being as strong as ten men and as fast as the one. One was even able to withstand fatal blows.’” He could almost feel Kei-shuk’s distain of the statement seeping from the brush strokes.

For some reason, the report had him thinking of Yona and Hak and the Dragon Warriors with them. “But why would she be on this side of the river?” He asked out loud.

He was alone in his tent. Kei-shuk had already set off back to Hiryuu Castle, to begin analyzing the reports of people going missing or being kidnapped in Water, and Ju-do and Guen-Tae were bedded down in their own tents. Even if it turns out that this has nothing to do with them, it might be worth visiting this village tomorrow…

The squad consisting of Su-won, Ju-do, Guen-Tae, Mu-ah, and Gyoku did not need much direction to find the site where the Kai stragglers had been stopped the next morning.
They just had to follow the carrion birds.

The villagers were in the process of burying the dead as they rode up. “Do you need help?” Guen-Tae asked.

“No; we were able to run, and the soldiers didn’t reach the village proper.” An older man with a youth in that gangly state between childhood and adulthood replied. “We’re not sure where the surviving stragglers fled to.”

“You guys are from Kouka, right?” The boy asked, after his father had walked away, reminding him to remember to bring home what his mother had asked for.

“Yes.” Su-won confirmed.

“I have a message from the crimson-haired girl, for ‘Su-won’.” The boy’s statement sent a ripple of shock through the group.

“What is the message? I’ll be sure to pass it on to Su-won-sama.” Su-won asked, recovering from his shock quicker than the others.

“‘The next time you decide to go off conquering, make sure the defeated army isn’t in a position to take their rage out on civilians.’” The boy repeated the message. “She and her guys were the ones who stopped the soldiers.” He added.

“Do you know how she and her men came to be here?” Ju-do inquired as Su-won considered the message.

“…will I get in trouble?” The boy asked.

“No.” Su-won assured him before Ju-do could say anything.

“I always wanted to see Kouka for myself, since the adults were always staring across the river and longing, even if they said they didn’t care, so I snuck onto a merchant ship.” The boy admitted. “I walked for what felt like forever, and I was really hungry. In the town across the river, I spotted a girl with some rice balls so…I stole them. She and the guys she was with chased me down, and she shot down a bird so I could take it to the cook shop. But the pretty guy, Yun, he gave me more rice balls so I didn’t have to go to the cook shop. Then the guy in the mask, Shin-ah I think was his name, spotted soldiers somehow, gathering at the river. I didn’t know how I could get back across, so the girl, Yona, said that they’d get me back home.”

The boy fiddled with his sash. “I hadn’t been feeling all that great, and once we reached my village, the guy in white, Kija, collapsed. My father wasn’t happy, but he let Kija stay at our house. But the next day, the really cool guy, Jaeha, collapsed too, so Father didn’t really want them in the house anymore, in case they gave the illness to us. Yona was REALLY mad about that. Shin-ah caught it next, and I realized that they were probably sick because of me, and the blond guy, Zeno, went with me to Kinkan to get medicine for them. That’s when the Kai soldiers attacked there. Zeno and I ran back with them chasing us the whole way. Yona’s fiancé, Hak, volunteered to buy all of us time, but all of them ended up fighting and protecting us. They left yesterday, after they stopped the soldiers.”

It felt like the boy was holding something back, but Su-won didn’t press him further. “Thank you for passing on her message. I will make sure to personally deliver it to Su-won-sama.” Su-won assured him again. “We’ll see if we can track down the surviving stragglers, so they don’t continue harassing all of you.”
“I can’t tell; are we following her, or is she following us?” Gyoku complained once they were out of sight of the killing field.

He complained mostly to distract himself from the dozen or so men who were just laying on the ground, dead without any visible wounds. The villagers hadn’t reached that part of the field yet, and the sight disturbed him. I don’t recall any of the Dragon Warriors being able to kill with a glance without leaving a trace…

“I think it’s a little of both.” Su-won admitted, a tad sheepish. “Even if she is following our movements, since she has greater freedom of movement, she can arrive to a location before us.”

Guen-Tae was quiet. I’m a bit bothered by Kei-shuk’s remark about ‘short rations’. It smacks of how Yuhon-sama would go on campaign without proper rations and equipment. But that only applies to Sky forces; Ju-do didn’t seem bothered by the thought, and neither did Su-won-sama. I’ll only raise a fuss if Kei-shuk tries that on my troops; I’d rather haul rations we end up not needing than to end up wishing for them when we’ve run out and can’t forage to fill the gap…

Chapter End Notes

I know this has taken longer than the last few chapters to get out, but I wanted to get the battle right. So please, let me know what you think of my version of the Zeno reveal battle.
“How’s everyone feeling?” Yun asked as he checked over Kija, Shin-ah, and Jaeha the next morning.

“MUCH better. It must be because of the medicine Kalgan and Zeno got.” Jaeha exclaimed.

“The medicine helped, but…just crossing the river, back into Kouka, was a bigger help.” Kija countered, letting Yun prod him.

“Since it was conquered by a crowned king, the blessing will spread into Kin Province, but it takes time. The river acting as a spiritual knife is slowing that down farther.” Yona explained, frowning down at the remains of Zeno’s robe and jacket.

“It seemed like your wounds started healing faster once we crossed the river, but you’re still not fully healed yet. So take it easy.” Yun cautioned.

“It was a really harsh battle.” Jaeha conceded. “But what was really harsh is that Shin-ah took off his mask and yet I didn’t get to see his eyes!”

Shin-ah twitched.

“It’s a really bad fight if he resorts to that.” Yun agreed, Kija frowning at Jaeha. “Leave Shin-ah alone.” Kija scolded.

“But Seiryuu’s eyes are supposed to be the most beautiful thing in the world, right? But we don’t know the truth of that unless we check…” Jaeha started ‘sneaking up’ on Shin-ah, who hunched down as if to hide, and Ao clung to his face to make it harder for Jaeha to take the mask off.

“It’s good to see everyone so lively!”

Attention turned to Zeno. Yona’s foresight in making extra clothes for Zeno proved to be a good thing, as otherwise he’d only have his pants and a robe of Yun’s to wear, along with his scarf. Yun had declared her tailoring ‘passable’. “It’s good that you’re lively despite your injuries.” He continued with a smile.

Walking over to where Zeno was sitting, Jaeha grabbed an arm, shoving his sleeve up. “What?” Zeno asked as Jaeha and Yun examined his arm.

“Oh, YOU’RE the one who had the worst injuries, remember?” Jaeha reminded him, his voice shaking slightly as he remembered the battle, and how by all rights they should be mourning over Zeno’s fresh grave and frantically feeling for any hint of yellow and the new Ouryuu.

“The scales are gone…” Yun muttered, poking Zeno’s arm. Yona’s said how the dragons’ power isn’t meant for this world, so now that I’m thinking about it, having the scales only appear after an
“Yeah; after a while they turn back to normal skin.” Zeno confirmed.

“So…you really…can’t die?” Yun brought up.

“I won’t die.”

“Hey…” Zeno looked up from Ao, mostly because of the suspicious tone in Yun’s voice. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Liar.” Everyone but Yona chorused, crowding around Zeno.

“You said you could fight for hundreds of years!” Kija accused.

“Just how many years are you leaving off?” Jaeha grumbled. Where’s he getting off on calling me ‘old’?!?!

Zeno leaned back, staring at the sky. “I don’t have an exact number, since it’s too much of a pain to keep count. And it’s not really a lie; physically I’m still seventeen.”

“So you’ve been alive long enough that you don’t want to keep count.” Jaeha noted.

“Two thousand, four hundred seventy three.” Yona set aside Zeno’s clothes and hugged her knees, not looking at anyone. “Two thousand four hundred fifty six years since the dragon gods descended, plus seventeen…while it was too painful for you to keep count, him-me felt like he had to keep count for you…” A sense of ancient sadness covered her.

“Is that all? Zeno would have sworn it was much longer.” The others stared at Zeno, dumbfounded.

He was over two thousand years old and thought more time than that had passed?

After a moment to absorb this, Kija spoke, “Zeno…that means then…you’re…” He couldn’t bring himself to voice the realization he had made, looking between Zeno and a forlorn Yona.

“Guen.” Attention turned back to Yona, who was looking past Kija. “Will he be able to see you now?”

Kija jumped as a clawed (?) hand landed on his shoulder. “He could have for a while now. He just never had a reason to look.”

Kija followed the clawed dragon hand, so much like his own, up the arm to a face, with white hair and ocean blue eyes. “……” He could only stare at who could only be his ancestor, open-mouthed.

“Pay up Abi!” Kija’s head whipped around to see a green-haired man with a spear, being glared at by a man with blue hair and Seiryuu’s eyes.

“So I wasn’t going crazy!!!” Yun shrunk back with a red face as everyone focused on him.

“It took exposure to Yona’s aura for you to be able to see us, and until Zeno revealed his power, there would have been the awkward question of where the ghost of the first Ouryuu was. Plus Kija had been spiritually blind with all of his predecessors clinging to him.” The First Seiryuu explained.

“And Abi was pissed at you, for thinking about whether or not you should’ve left them for dead.”
The First Ryokuryuu added, hooking an arm around Jaeha’s neck.

Jaeha looked as uncomfortable with the action as Hak did whenever Jaeha did the same thing to him.

“Shuten.” Yona scolded gently.

“So you’ve been with Hime-sama this whole time?” Kija asked, his mind still reeling. “Wait, what predecessors clinging to me?”

“Since she was born, for the most part.” Guen confirmed. “We would leave on occasion to check up on you guys or whatever.”

“For some reason, after death the spirits of the Hakuryuu would cling to the present Hakuryuu. Many previous Hakuryuu were crushed by the sorrow and longing of those spirits, but you’ve been strong enough to resist their influence.” Yona explained. “However, they effectively rendered you spiritually blind to the ghosts and spirits you should have been able to see as a dragon. While they are closer to Heaven, than Earth, technically dragons exist between the two, so Dragon Warriors can see ghosts and spirits. They’ve been appeased enough for you to see Guen, Shuten, and Abi, but I don’t think you’ll ever see the whole range there is to see in the spirit realm.”

“…the morning after you came, my arm felt lighter…” Kija remembered. “It felt lighter because of their relief?”

“More like Yona went to the Tomb of Hakuryuu and offered her apologies and gratitude. Which she didn’t need to do.” Guen frowned at Yona, which she ignored. “That was arguably the largest influence, with the awakening second, and the first time you defended her third.”

“I was so disappointed I couldn’t mock you after you passed out, so thank you for discovering bugs.” Shuten told Kija in all seriousness.

“So you spent the whole time alone?” Yun asked, bringing attention back to Zeno. “I mean, I doubt those guys were around all the time.”

“Zeno…couldn’t see them until after he started visiting the Miss as a baby. But…”

Kaya appeared, latching onto Zeno. “Zeno did get married.”

“M-MARRIED?!” Yun, Kija, and Jaeha were stunned.

“What? Live long enough and getting married is normal.” Zeno remarked, snuggling up with Kaya.

“I’ve seen her around you, but I never expected her to be your wife. A sweetheart, maybe…” Jaeha said. “Of course, that was before learning just how old you really are.”

“It’s nice to meet everyone properly. I’m Kaya.” She greeted everyone with a wave.

“How long ago were you…I mean…” Yun tripped over the words, not sure how to ask his question.

“Kaya died when Zeno was one hundred.” He answered quietly.

“And you’ve been haunting him this whole time?!?” Kija exclaimed, while at the same time Jaeha exclaimed, “You’ve only been married once?!”

“Yup.” Kaya affirmed. “I’ve been able to stay at his side because some of his power was shared with me when I was alive. Plus I’ve had plenty of company, with Zeno’s brothers.”
“Where do you get off calling me ‘old’?” Jaeha grumbled.

“It doesn’t matter how many years Zeno’s seen; his body is still seventeen. So physically you’re still older than Zeno.” He retorted. “And getting married once is enough, isn’t it?”

“Wait, how was Zeno able to share his power? That’s not possible, is it?” Yun asked.

“We ARE married, in every sense of the word.” Kaya said, a sly look conveying what she meant, making Kija blush.

“Part of it is the nature of Zeno’s power, being present throughout his entire body at much the same level, unlike yours, which is concentrated where the power is expressed.” Yona explained. “The Yellow Dragon God is the First Dragon, the Dragon of Life.”

She stopped there, not sure how much Zeno wanted to reveal, about the exact nature of his power and how it related to Yellow Brother.

“From what Zeno learned from him, Ouryuu-kami had foreseen a future where Ou-sama would need to be protected. It’s one thing to gift a limb or eyes; it’s a completely different thing to gift a body. So…he sent a piece of himself to be born human, so, when the Dragon Gods descended…all he had to do was reunite with that piece. It didn’t work out like he thought it would, since he had expected to be the dominate influence, not Zeno.” Zeno cautiously revealed.

It was oddly freeing, speaking of his past and his power.

Everyone was quiet, considering, before Yun asked, “So…what does all of that mean for you?”

There was a faint smile on Zeno’s face as he replied, “One day, I’ll be able to go to Heaven and be with everyone. I won’t be trapped on Earth.”

“Wait, are we the only ones not to know?” Jaeha asked, eyeing Hak and Shin-ah.

“What I’ve remembered from Ha-kun is pretty random, but I do remember Zeno from back then.” Hak admitted. “Plus, I broke his jaw, back when he joined up with us, and he was speaking clearly within a minute.” He added, pointing out what the others had missed during that particular exchange.

Most eyes turned to Shin-ah. “…no one asks me anything.” He reminded them.

“I’m afraid I’ve taken advantage of Shin-ah’s quiet nature, when it came to things I hadn’t felt ready to bring to the group.” Yona admitted, a touch guilty.

“Now that that’s settled…” Yun pointed to Guen, Shuten, and Abi, who had started fighting after Shuten’s comment about being happy for the chance to mock Kija after he discovered bugs. “Aren’t you going to stop them?” Yun asked as the fight turned into wrestling on the ground.

“Why? They look like cute baby dragons playing!” Yona replied, drawing strange looks from everyone but Zeno and the fighting trio. “Well they do.” She protested with a pout.

“So why Zeno?” Jaeha asked Kaya.

“Why not Zeno? He’s so adorable and sweet. He gave me nearly everything I had given up on, after I caught consumption and isolated myself. He stayed with my body until I was bones, so how could I not stay at his side?” Kaya gushed, turning nostalgic at the end.

“Hmm…” Jaeha considered. Zeno suddenly seemed surprisingly grown up, now that I know he’s
married. Maybe because marriage always seemed like something real grownups do…

“Jaeha?” Jaeha jumped at being addressed by name by Zeno. “Flirt with my wife and I’m ripping off your dragon leg and beating you with it, okay?” Zeno said cheerfully, his tone completely at odds with the dangerous look in his eyes and the smile with too many teeth showing to be friendly.

Jaeha gulped, but still noted how red Kaya’s face got at Zeno’s threat.

“Hold it!” Yun suddenly said. “If you’d been visiting Yona since she was a baby, where were you between her fleeing the castle and Awa? Why weren’t you with her?” He asked Zeno.

“It’s one thing to be a passive presence in my life; it’s a completely different thing to actively serve. I had to show I was worthy.” Yona explained.

Zeno shook his head, surprising her. “You had to prove to yourself that you were worthy. I felt I could protect you better by following behind, at least until you found Jaeha and convinced him.”

“You said you left your village a long time ago; I don’t recall my clan having any records of an Ouryuu Village.” Kija commented.

“I DID leave my village a long time ago—the one I was born in. Plague came and us few who survived had to put the whole place to the torch. Between that and time, there’s no trace people ever lived there. But there’s never been a place like Hakuryuu Village.” Zeno explained.

“I was too ill for children to have ever been a serious option, so we didn’t have a family to found a village with.” Kaya elaborated.

“So any more questions? Then we’re good!” Zeno declared, casually reaching into the pile of Guen, Shuten, and Abi to pull Shuten’s ponytail.

“How come you can touch them?” Jaeha asked, a little put out by that.

“Zeno’s closer to a true dragon, so he can touch us.” Abi said as he crawled out and dusted himself off. “I think he might be paying Shuten back for all the times he called him useless.”

“Would Zeno really be that petty?” Shin-ah surprisingly asked.

Everyone looked at Zeno and Shuten, who were pulling on each other’s hair while Zeno tried to keep Shuten from biting him (Utterly ignoring everyone in the process).

Shin-ah had his answer.

“That was good! Time for bed!” Zeno said to himself as he carried the bedding Yun had laundered that morning to the tent. Yona was still hovering by him, so everyone was crowding into the large tent tonight, Yun managing a temporary arrangement to stretch it out somewhat with Hak and Yona’s tent.

Kija suddenly appeared, lifting the stack of bedding out of his hands. “I’ll take it.” He said, a little subdued.

“H-hey, you’re still hurt!” Zeno protested, reclaiming half the stack.

“I—“ Kija stopped, not really sure what to say or how to say it. I always daydreamed of hearing tales of Hiryuu-ou-sama and the first generation of Dragon Warriors directly from them, but to learn that not only have they been present this whole time, but that the one I deemed the least concerned to
our cause had been one of them…!

“Zeno doesn’t mind that you tried to make him train his power. With how little information about Ouryuu’s power there is, it makes sense that you’d think he only needed training to use it.”

Kija jumped when Zeno said this. “But—“ He protested. “…I don’t know what to say, after all that’s happened and learning the truth.” He finally admitted. “I can hardly conceive of even of a quarter of the time you’ve walked Kouka, waiting, let alone…” No wonder he doesn’t seem to care about the Four Dragon Warriors; how many has he felt die?

“Learning that Zeno’s technically older than Kouka Kingdom itself shouldn’t make that much of a difference. Zeno is still Zeno, just like learning the Miss was aware of having been Ou-sama doesn’t mean she isn’t the Miss.” He pointed out.

“…why did you never come to Hakuryuu Village? Surely, had you come…” Kija tentatively asked.

“He was too much of a ‘fraidy cat.” Kija nearly leapt out of his skin as his ancestor’s hand landed on his head and ruffled his hair, a move that felt unbecomingly familiar. “Even though we didn’t look our ages until our successors were born, it was still a reminder of how things had changed.”

“Zeno was still watching over Yak-shi and his family. He didn’t leave until after Yak-shi’s and Yona’s deaths, after all.”

“Yona’?” Kija questioned.

“Ou-sama’s daughter. She was born after his death.” Guen replied. “Didn’t she marry into the family of the first proper Fire General?”

“Yup. With how carefully each succeeding family has been to marry someone of the previous family, there likely is some truth in the dead Fire General’s claim of being Ou-sama’s descendants. But Won-shi married a woman from each Tribe, and with the amount of time that’s past, the Miss is right in saying that all of Kouka is the descendants of Ou-sama.” Zeno confirmed. “Zeno thinks the little king is Won-shi reborn, but he might be remembering wrong.”

“Won-shi?” Jaeha asked, walking up after making sure the fire was properly put out.

“Hiryuu-sama’s great-grandson.” Shuten answered, getting a dirty look from Jaeha.

Seeing his brothers besides their descendants made Zeno smile. “You’re matched pairs, both of you.” He remarked.

“Oi, I’m nothing like him!” Jaeha protested, getting his own dirty look from Shuten.

“Sure you are; both of you like ladies company a lot!” Zeno asserted. “While Hak—Kija is as reckless as Guen!”

Kija and Guen made identical sour faces, unwitting demonstrating Zeno’s point. “Seriously. Kija’s determination in making it this far, and how Jaeha looks out for everyone the most, despite what he may say…it’s very familiar.” Zeno continued with a soft, nostalgic smile, entering the tent with his stack of bedding, leaving Guen, Kija, Shuten, and Jaeha standing there, slightly dumbfounded.

“…damnit, he’s right.” Shuten reluctantly admitted.

Chapter End Notes
Finally! I can have the main group interacting with the Monkeys! Please let me know your thoughts on the above.

Debating on ‘ending’ at a good stopping point, and continuing the story in a separate story, but that’s mostly because this has gotten epically longer than I may have anticipated.
“So, Zeno will—“

“Be helping Yun.” Kaya cut in. “You can’t dodge chores now that Yun knows the truth.”

Drooping a little, Zeno still did as he was told, beginning to slice up the daikon radishes.

Yun stared at Kaya sparkly-eyed. “Teach me!”

“Lad, unless you’re going to start sleeping with Zeno, you can’t learn it.” Zeno commented. “Since it involves the cessation of certain activities.”

Yun instantly turned red, and Kaya couldn’t keep the smile off her face as she glared at Zeno, her heart not in it.

Then both Zeno and Kaya’s heads whipped around, both looking in the direction Shin-ah had gone in. “What is it?” Yun asked, slightly worried.

“…nothing.” The couple muttered, exchanging a look.

Yun looked between the two, but let the matter drop, changing the subject. “So where are those guys?” Yun asked, eyeing his surroundings suspiciously, fully expecting at least Shuten to pop out of nowhere.

“Probably checking on things for Yona.” Kaya replied. “Since I’m bound to Zeno, I can’t go very far from him, but they’re free to move as they please, and so basically act as Yona’s spies.”

“Once she was older, the Miss had Zeno travel around and investigate rumors. Got conscripted in Fire once, and Kum-ji’s and Hyou’s drug networks. Never did find out where those addicts were disappearing to…” Zeno trailed off with a shrug. “Once Zeno had enough info, he’d get himself killed so he could leave and report to the Miss.”

“There’s no way she ordered that last part.” Yun commented, horrified at how casually Zeno spoke of ‘getting killed’, despite the lack of permanence.

“Once he suspected what Ouryuu-kami had done, Ou-sama refused to let me fight. If he couldn’t avoid sending me with the others, he’d ordered me to stick with Abi, and get him to safety once the paralysis kicked in. If there’s anything I can do now, to help the Miss with my power in any way… I’ll do it.” Zeno elaborated.

Quiet echoed. “…damn, you’re gloomy as all hell.” Jaeha, who had finished his assigned task and returned, remarked. “Don’t suppose I can really blame you…” He conceded.

He and Yun wandered away in search of the others, and Kaya crouched down by Zeno. “That darkness…” She started, worried. “Do you think that’s keeping the others away?”

“Maybe. But none of us in the spiritually aware crowd noticed anything when we agreed to camp here. There was only that spike.” He replied, standing, before he frowned.

“Something’s different about Shin-ah.”
Not quite running, but not walking at normal pace either, the couple headed over to where the others were. “…topic is Shin-ah’s rebellious phase.” Kija declared.

“What’s this about Shin-ah’s rebellion?” Kaya asked as she and Zeno came over to investigate.

Catching sight of ‘Shin-ah’, she stiffened. “Who are you, and what have you done to Shin-ah?” She challenged, to the confusion of all but Zeno.

‘Shin-ah’ smirked, and then it was blatantly obvious that it wasn’t Shin-ah in control. “I owe no answers to a ghost so hung up on a person that she chained herself to him, tormenting him.”

“That’s my wife you’re insulting, and she’s free to torment me anytime.” Zeno stepped between ‘Shin-ah’ and Kaya. “I thought I felt darkness…whatever you are now, you were still a Seiryuu.”

“What did you do to Shin-ah?!” Kija demanded, tensing for battle even though he had no clue how to fight this thing that looked like Shin-ah, whatever it was.

A darkness rose up, rendering the being into a black silhouette, save for the Dragon’s Eyes. “Kija!” Jaeha threw an arm over Kija’s face, hiding his eyes.

One of them has to be able to protect Yun and Zeno, and warn Yona and Hak.

Zeno darted between the being and the pair, meeting the eyes undaunted. Yun, behind everyone else, fell on his rear as he caught a touch of the paralyzing darkness. “YUN! IT’S NOT REALLY SHIN-AH! DON’T LOOK AT THE EYES! ZENO—!” Jaeha yelled.

Zeno didn’t move, and took the full force of the darkness, which had taken the shape of a dragon. “ZENO!” Kaya screamed, throwing herself between the being and Zeno, who, while unsteady on his feet, was quickly recovering. “Huh…so that’s what it’s like to be eaten by a dragon…” He mumbled to himself.

Despite not seeing his face, the other dragons shivered as Zeno continued. “That won’t work on me.” He stated simply. “Over two thousand years and Zeno’s still a baby chick like the others.” He walked closer, intended to confront the being and divert his attention from everyone else, but Kaya stuck to her spot in front of him. “Kaya…” He pleaded. “Please…”

Kaya furiously shook her head. “No Zeno. I’m not moving. You gave me so much…and I thanked you by dying. Even if there was nothing that could have been done…”

The dark dragon that was the power of Seiryuu lashed out again, knocking Kaya out of the way and hitting Zeno’s left side. “What’s it feel like, to be devoured?” The Seiryuu asked, relishing in the experience.

“Boring.” Zeno drawled, sparing a quick glance to Kaya. It didn’t seem like she had been paralyzed, as she was rising up onto her hands and knees. “It’s making me yawn.” He emphasized the point by yawning in an exaggerated fashion. “Maybe you should try crushing my heart this time.”

The taunt worked, and a claw of darkness struck Zeno in the heart. “Zeno…!” Kija, Jaeha, Kaya, and Yun cried.

Kaya and Yun didn’t bother rising to their feet, crawling to be next to Zeno with Kija and Jaeha. Thankfully, the backlash finally hit the Seiryuu, and it fell to the ground, still inside Shin-ah. “M’okay!” Zeno startled everyone by springing up.

“Don’t scare us like that!” Kaya scolded, smacking his chest.
“I won’t scare you if you don’t scare me!” Zeno retorted.

“What is he? You said it’s not Shin-ah…but is he possessed, or has something taken his form?” Yun asked, watching the collapsed form.

“I don’t know what it is now, beyond a possessing ghost, but in the past, it was a Seiryuu for sure. The fact the paralysis backlashed proved it.” Zeno said. “But whether the paralysis backlashed onto the ghost, or onto Shin-ah…”

Yona hummed as she and Hak walked back, her arms full of apples while Hak carried the boar she had killed. “I hope Yun won’t be too mad that we’re so late, once he sees what we’re bringing back.”

“It’s Yun; he likely knows that we didn’t spend the whole time hunting or foraging.” He reminded her.

“It seems like the others aren’t in camp yet either, since I’m not feeling any emotions…” Yona trailed off as she and Hak took in the collapsed large tent, with Yun huddled in on himself by the fire. “Yun!” She cried, barely remembering to not drop the apples as she ran over to him. “What happened?”

“Shin-ah rebelled, and Kija called an emergency dragon meeting, then Kaya and Zeno were saying that it wasn’t really Shin-ah, and—“

“Oi, stop and start over; you’re babbling worse than White Snake.” Hak forced himself to deadpan. *What happened to unsettle Yun like this?*

“Take a deep breath and go one thing at a time.” Yona gently prodded.

Following her advice, Yun did exactly that.

“We should’ve come back sooner.” Yona fretted. “Even if it’s good to know the results of a Seiryuu/Ouryuu fight…”

“Yona, you and Raiju are entitled to go and take some time to yourselves, away from all of us, just like how you wouldn’t begrudge us for doing that if we were in relationships as well.” Yun assured her, still worried but calmer now that they were back.

“The power of Seiryuu turned into a curse at some point, right? It sounds like it was the curse that was in control.” Hak remarked.

“Zeno said that he wasn’t sure what it was, just that it was a possessing ghost that had been a Seiryuu in life.” Yun explained. “But where did Kija and Jaeha go? I think Kaya got dragged along with Zeno, since she said she couldn’t go too far from Zeno…”

“They must have chased after them. So we need to go and find them, and hopefully find Shin-ah, Zeno, and Kaya.” Hak said.

“Lemme form the rice into onigiri first!” Yun countered as he started doing just that, not willing to let the lunch he had cooked go to waste.

“And you say you’re not a mother…” Hak commented, Yona kneeling down to help Yun.

“I’m not a mother!” Yun growled, nearly squishing the onigiri he was shaping into an uncooked rice
“Except that you are. Remember the space we entered into, when Jaeha was poisoned by Nadai? You appeared in the forming of a nesting mother dragon. If it is possible to form a dragon self without being a dragon’s mate, that’s what it would be. And it’s not a bad thing that you look after all of us like that.” Yona said with a smile, making Yun blush at the praise.

Setting out for the others, onigiri in tow, the trio found Ao, next to Shin-ah’s mask. “Pukyu, lunch.” With that, Ao jolted awake, scampering to Yun in search of food.

“Too bad I can’t think of a new insult for White Snake; he answers that like a nickname now.” Hak complained.

“That’s because it is a nickname now. And Jaeha doesn’t register insults at all.” Yona pointed out, before she spotted something else. “A dragon’s head…?”

It was the head off of a dragon statue, the cleanness of the break indicating that someone, perhaps Shin-ah, had sliced off the head. At the base of the statue were stairs leading down into the ground and darkness. “This has to have been the site of a dragon’s village, with something like this here.” Yona remarked, examining the statue.

“Wonder how far this goes?” Yun wondered, as Hak quickly lit a torch.

Hak led the way, Yona and Ao right behind him. Yun was about to follow, when a low rumble caught his attention. “Where’s that sound…?” He mumbled, looking back the way they came.

“YUN!” His head whipped back around to see the statue sliding back over the stairs.

“Here!” Yun managed to toss a bundle of onigiri to Yona before the opening fully closed.

Hak pushed at the statue’s base. “It’s not moving.”

“Let’s go further in. There’s bound to be another way out, and we might find the others as well.” Yona suggested, starting to walk down the steps.

“You’re surprisingly calm about this.” Hak noted. “What did Yun throw you?”

“Onigiri.” She held up the bundle. “Somehow, that kept me from panicking. Plus,” She turned to look back at Hak. “As long as you’re here with me, there’s nothing I have to be afraid of.” She said with a smile.

Hak couldn’t help his blush, but the affection and embarrassment he was feeling turned to concern as Yona suddenly collapsed. “Hime-san!”

His heart left his throat when he saw that she was still breathing easily, so the air couldn’t have gotten to her yet. He looked between the closed entrance and the darkness below. “Looks like I have no choice but to go forward.” Slinging Yona over his shoulder, the only option he had to carry her and the torch, he started down the steps.

“One…two…three!” Kija and Jaeha struck the rock with their respective Dragon’s limbs, but all it did was leave a crater in the rock.
“No go…what kind of rock is this, if the two of us together can’t break it with our powers?” Jaeha complained with a grimace.

“Let’s see if there’s another way through here. We’ll get Shin-ah and Zeno back. And Kaya.” Kija said.

“I hope this whole system isn’t full of those things…” Jaeha said quietly, gulping at the shadow figures coming out of the walls, sensing living souls.

“There’s something here?” Kija squinted, but gave up with a sigh. “Ever since meeting Guen-Shodai and the other First Generation spirits, I’ve been trying to see all the things I never realized were there, but it’s not working.”

“Trust me, you’re not missing anything by not seeing them. You’re really not.” Jaeha assured Kija, eyeing the shadow figures that actively shied away from the white aura that was the Hakuryuu predecessors. “But can you feel that heaviness? And that sickening feeling? If I’m not careful, I might pass out.”

“I’m fine, for now anyway. And if you pass out I’ll just smack you awake!” Kija assured him, holding up his dragon hand.

“That would kill me long before it—“ Jaeha was cut off when Kija let out a high pitched, girly scream. “BUG!!!!!!” He screeched, clinging to Jaeha like that would make the bug go away.

“Then again, it’s not like there’s time to pass out around you…” Jaeha noted, before noticing just what the bug had hidden in. “A skull? I hope that’s not a prequel to our future.”

“What IS this place anyway?” Kija, over the bug appearance, asked, spotting more bones. “They’re old too, just going on the design of the sword, if I’m remembering my history right.”

Jaeha picked up something that looked familiar. “…it looks like Shin-ah’s mask.” Kija remarked.

“Between this, and that broken dragon statue at the entrance, I’m starting to think that this might have once been a Seiryuu Village.” Jaeha pondered. “Because only Hakuryuu Village has stayed in the same spot all these centuries, right?”

Kija nodded. “It seems like the Seiryuu clan has a tendency towards tunnels, since when we met Shin-ah, they were in tunnels in the mountains to the east. But whomever these people had been, I doubt the deaths were ones of thirst or starvation…”

Kaya glared at the shadow figures clinging to Zeno. “The only one who gets to feel up my husband is me!” She growled, managing to tug one off, only for another to take its place.

“GAH!” Zeno shouted as he awoke to find the shadow figures on him. “That was scary. How many of them are there?”

“Zeno! I’m glad you’re awake!” Kaya cried.

“Has he hurt you?” Zeno demanded, glancing at what he was sure was the origin ghost of the Seiryuu curse, still possessing Shin-ah.

“She’s of no use to me. And it’s not like I can stop her heart and get rid of her either, for all that she feels alive.” The Seiryuu said dismissively. “So a woman actually liked a dragon enough to stick around? Ouryuu.”
“So Zeno was right; you are a previous Seiryuu, possessing the current one. No one else could have used Seiryuu’s power as you have. So this was once Seiryuu Village?” Zeno asked. *If I keep him talking, I might be able to talk him out of Shin-ah, or work my ropes free...*

“Correct. And the tomb of the Seiryuu, since the times of myth.” The Seiryuu confirmed.

Kaya, who had leaned against what she now knew could only be a coffin, leapt away. Despite being dead, she still found coffins and tombs and bones a little creepy.

“Isn’t it about time for all of you to let my nephew return to his body?” Zeno asked calmly. “Even if Shin-ah caused this, it was by accident.”

“‘Accident’?” The Seiryuu scoffed. “How could it have been an accident, that we, who’ve longed to enter the light and toss our masks away, freely controlling this power, finally have the perfect vessel?”

He grabbed some of Zeno’s hair, drawing their faces level. “Ze—“ Kaya was dogpiled by shadow figures. Zeno couldn’t let himself spare attention to worry over her as the Seiryuu asked the question he had been waiting for. “Why don’t you become a vessel for my successors and comrades?”

“Sure.” Zeno closed his eyes as the shadow Seiryuu figures lunged at him. “But it would be better if you didn’t try.” He stated as they connected.


“I’ve long lost count of the number of times my heart has been pierced and my body torn apart. I’ve lost count of the years where I thought about and tried erasing myself. I’ve even lost count of the times I tore myself apart. Believe me, if I could open my body and heart to all of you, I would. But that’s something a living monster like me can’t do.” The shadow Seiryuu figures were launched back out of Zeno’s body, sprawling around him on the ground, twitching as a golden glow surrounded Zeno, giving him the appearance of a humanoid dragon.

“Are you saying that your burden is not one we can take on?” The Seiryuu questioned.

The only reply he received was a sad half-smile.

So, having had it demonstrated to him that the invulnerable vessel he wanted was (apparently) out of his reach, he changed tack. “Earlier, four people entered the underground. First Hakuryuu and Ryokuryuu. Then a pair of humans. They’re working their way here. So they’ll be easy to take.”

Yona opened her eyes to a gentle blackness. “Where...”

“Yona.” Shin-ah, maskless, appeared, surrounded in a faint glow like moonlight, much as she was surrounded by a glow resembling a torch. “It’s not safe for you to find me.”

“Shin-ah!” He didn’t tense as she embraced him, quietly making her worry more. “What do you mean?”

“This place...it’s where the Dragon’s Eyes first became a curse. The past Seiryuu that make up the curse are hurting everyone. My body isn’t mine right now. My power...it hurt Zeno and Kaya.” The blackness surrounding them changed to a village scene. “The past Seiryuu inside of my body right now...I saw how the power become a curse. How he was used as bait, and trapped here for ages.” The event he was referring to played out around them.
“…you opened your heart and body to them so you help them, didn’t you?” His silence was enough of an answer. “Shin-ah, let me wake up.”

“Yo—“

“I’ll come for you. No matter how many times, no matter where… I will always come for you.” She rested her forehead against his. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Shifting, their lips met in a kiss. There was no romance, no lust in it, for the bond between the two of them went beyond all of that. Letting the kiss end, she assured him one more time. “Our hearts will remain unshaken.”

Yona opened her eyes to blackness. For a brief moment, she wondered if she was still in the dream, but then she felt Hak’s hand holding hers. “Hak!”

“Hime-san, you’re awake…” Hak’s voice sounded strained.

Now that they were further underground, she could feel the weight of the souls that were trapped in here. While they clung to the edge of her torch, they could not touch it. But Hak’s dark flame was more closely aligned with the darkness these souls were trapped in, and she could feel them attaching to him.

Running her hand up his arm, she found his lips mostly by luck, kissing him with her fire. His dark flame flared in response to hers, and that was enough to burn the fledging attachments off of his aura. “Better?” She whispered.

“Yeah… I still feel heavy.” He complained as she slung an arm around her shoulders, to help support him.

“Puyyu!” Ao scampered ahead into the darkness.

Smiling even though he couldn’t see it, she said, “Let’s follow Ao and find the others.”

“They’re close by. Do you feel up to striking the wall again?” Kija asked.

Jaeha collapsing to the ground was his answer. “Jaeha!”

On the other side of the wall, the Seiryuu perked up, as did Zeno. “They’ve gotten close. But it looks like Ryokuryuu has hit his limit. Per—“

Now, the Seiryuu had done something no hostage taker should do. Take his eyes and attention off his prisoner.

Zeno slammed into his back, knocking him to the ground. Snatching Shin-ah’s sword, he cut himself free. Kaya hovered on the edge. She wanted to try and help Zeno, but there wasn’t anything she could really do to help him. “So what will you do now? Kill me?” The Seiryuu taunted. “You can’t do that unless you’re willing to hurt the body.”

“I could never be able to do that, even if you weren’t inside Shin-ah. All of the dragons, except Zeno, are Guen, Abi, and Shuten’s children. That makes all of you, all those generations, Zeno’s nephews. So Zeno can’t help up find all of you adorable.” He said with a fond smile.

“Sleeve!” Kaya cried as Zeno raised the sword.
“Right!” Roughly shoving his sleeve up, Zeno sliced off his hand, much to the confusion and bafflement of the Seiryuu. “?!"

“Now, Ryokuryuu’s trouble, and the candles are almost gone. It’s pretty unsightly, but…” The scales sprang out from the site of the cut spread down his hand, turning the hand into one that looked much like Hakuryuu’s. “I think I’ll break out now.”

Kija jumped at the sound of crumbling rock, and briefly worried about a cave-in, until he whirled around and saw Zeno. “Zeno!”

“How’s Ryokuryuu, you still alive?”

“So-somehow…” Jaeha groaned out.

“Ouryuu, what the hell is—” The Seiryuu started demanding as he followed Zeno through the now destroyed door.

Faster than he realized, Hakuryuu was in front of him, grabbing his face. “Haku—“

“Return my younger brother.” Kija growled.

He couldn’t stop his laugh at that. “‘Younger brother’? Don’t tell me the dragon warriors are playing happy families now?”

“If you want to possess someone, possess me. I don’t care; I’ll bear all of it.” Kija offered

He chuckled. This brat didn’t realize it? “The divine protection of the Hakuryuu predecessors is too strong.” He said, grabbing the sword Ouryuu had carelessly dropped, swinging at Hakuryuu.

“Pukyuu!” Ao scampered at the dark being that her blue moon dragon was trying to help with his body. For this stunt she wouldn’t share her latest batch of nuts!

“Stupid squirrel!” The Seiryuu managed to grab the squirrel and toss it away from him. “You’re in my way!"

“Shin-ah.”

Turning, his eyes widened, and he started trembling. It was the girl who had entered the tunnels, the man with her a step behind and to her right. “Hime-sama!” Hakuryuu exclaimed.

“Sorry I’m late. Yun sent onigiri.” She said, tossing a leaf-wrapped bundle at Hakuryuu, who caught it despite his confusion.

“Who are you?!” He demanded as the girl approached, blustering to conceal his fear.

Now that she was here, she seemed more like a torch, especially with how his successors clung to her. “I am the one all of you lived and died waiting for. So if you’re going to be possessing anyone, it should be me.” She said calmly, meeting his eyes without fear as Hakuryuu started to panic.

For some reason, tears began falling, from him and all his successors. “Why…? I don’t—“ A warm hand touched his cheek, brushing away tears that were quickly replaced.

All the strength left the legs of his living successor. Before he realized it, he was hanging onto the fire girl, her arms returning the embrace. “What’s your name?”

He froze. What WAS his name? Not Seiryuu, he was sure of that.
A distant, forgotten memory floated up, of sun and laughter. And a girl…”Soren.” He sobbed. “My name is Soren.”

“Shin-ah, the one you’re possessing, showed me what happened. It was really scary to watch. I can’t imagine living through it.” She said gently.

“I didn’t want to; I hate fighting. But I couldn’t save her any other way.”

“Her?”

“She…she was never scared of me. And called me by name. To keep her and our—“ He froze. “…our son. I—my successor was my son. How did I forget that?! I was scared, but to protect—I’d do anything. She named him Ren-so.” Soren rambled, things he had forgotten flowing out.

One of the dark forms of his successors refined, turning back into a person, with a painfully familiar face. “I had forgotten, too. I was four, and after Mama died no one said it. My successor’s parents killed themselves, for producing a cursed child, and he wasn’t named…by them or me.” Ren-so admitted, mournful at the end.

Everything shifted, and he and all sixteen of his successors were in a moonlit field with the girl, the blue form of a dragon in the distance. The one he had possessed half-hid her with his body, tense.

“Shin-ah, it’s okay.” She assured him, laying a hand on his arm.

Slumping, he let her pass. “I’ll call you by name, all of you.” She walked, not to him, but to Ren-so. “Ren-so,” She began. “Your time has gone, never to return. May you find peace above the skies.”

Ren-so nodded and disappeared.

She moved onto the next one. “Was there a name you were addressed with, other than Seiryuu?”

He shook his head.

“Sai-jin. Your name is Sai-jin.”

Like Ren-so, Sai-jin disappeared.

This continued down through his successors, her somehow approaching them each in order. “Cho-in.”

“Tae.”

“Jun.”

“Masato.”

“Shinta.”

“Hiro.”

“Dai-u.”

“Kisuke.”

“Tenchi.”
“Kenji.”

“Yuma.”

“Kentaro.”

She approached the last one remaining, besides himself and the current Seiryuu, Shin-ah. “You’re Ao, aren’t you?” She asked with a fond smile.

“The brat did call me that.” He acknowledged.

Ao jumped when she laid a hand on his cheek. “Thank you. You taught Shin-ah well, in the time you had.”

Shin-ah, the current Seiryuu, drew near. “Goodbye, Ao.” He whispered, tears in his eyes.

Ao nodded in answer as he faded away, his own eyes suspiciously bright.

“Your time’s long gone, Soren.” The fire girl reminded him.

“I know. No matter how I struggled, time wouldn’t turn back.”

“At least, thanks to Shin-ah, I was able to help all of you.” She added.

“What…?”

“He let you in, so he could help you.”

The world turned hazy. “Will she be there?” Soren asked, desperately.

As bad as the darkness was, the light would be worse, if she wasn’t there and he couldn’t apologize to her. For forgetting her, and letting the anger consume him.

“Yes.”

“You said you’re who we waited for…who are you?” He couldn’t see anything but whiteness and the girl. Only now did he realize the color of the girl’s hair: crimson.

“Hiryuu.”

The knot in his chest that had formed when he laid eyes on the girl untied, and with the knowledge that Hiryuu-ou-sama forgave his actions, he remember the name of the one he so shamefully forgot.

‘Hoshiko…’

Chapter End Notes

Extra long, mostly as an apology. I hated reading the part where as far as everyone knows Shin-ah’s just being weird, so it took longer. The last part has been written for a while; HUGE pain making up names for all the Seiryuu before Shin-ah up to our tunnel buddy.
“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!?!?!” The trio of Guen, Abi, and Shuten roared as they finally returned to camp, moving to fuss over everyone.

“Well where have YOU all been?!” Yun demanded back, moving to skin and butcher Yona’s boar. Thankfully it still looked alright, since he remembered to cover the carcass before they left.

“There was a barrier that had a confuse effect. It kept us out.” Guen explained. “It just suddenly vanished, and then Abi remembered that his clan had had a village here once.”

“Plus the burial site for dozens of Seiryuu, since even longer ago; this had been an estate of my wife’s, the one where they traditionally buried family members.” Abi added. “So the curse of Seiryuu is gone?”

“I named them, all of them, and that was enough to help them. But Shin-ah was the one who helped me to help them.” Yona said, a sad smile as she remembered Soren’s face, his real face, in the field, as he asked if ‘she’ would be there.

“Well it’s a good thing you never got as mad with me as you do Shuten, cuz it doesn’t really work.” Zeno chirped. “Well, even more than how it doesn’t work right anyway.”

“Huh?” Jaeha blinked. “What do you mean?”

“We first learned about the paralysis ability of the Eyes when Abi got angry at Shuten and glared at him, and both of them collapsed. As Shuten recovered, it seems like Seiryuu’s power is of limited effect on fellow Dragon Warriors.” Yona said.

“Wait, so we would’ve been fine?” Kija asked.

“Considering Abi never actually tried to kill me, caution was for the best.” Shuten told him.

“…before we leave, can we go back into the tunnels?” Shin-ah tentatively asked over their dinner, the boar Yona had killed, with a mix of fresh and stewed apples.

“So we can lay the bones to rest properly, right?” Yona confirmed.

He nodded. “Also, I remember, from Soren…where the clan documents are, with the list of Seiryuu up to his successor.”

“My clan can make new copies, for our own library and for Shin-ah’s clan!” Kija agreed excitedly.

“As long as attendance isn’t mandatory.” Jaeha said, unable to stop his shiver as he remembered
“Kija likely needs to come, besides me and Shin-ah. Or Hak.” Yona pondered. “At least one person needs to stay outside anyway, in case the second entrance closes unexpectedly.”

Meanwhile, Kaya and Zeno were in their own little world, fussing over each other. “So Soren didn’t do anything to you while I was out?”

“No Zeno.” Kaya replied, getting fed up with his repeated questioning. “All he did was give me a dirty look then ignore me. So did the shadow figures of the other Seiryuu, at least until they dogpiled me. But I wonder why I wasn’t paralyzed when his power knocked me out of the way?”

“Dunno. Didn’t think Seiryuu’s power could do as it did when it knocked you out of the way to start with. But Zeno’s wondering what he meant, when he said you’re mostly alive.” Zeno questioned quietly.

As the couple were huddled together, seemingly whispering sweet nothings to each other, Jaeha found himself watching them. Then something Zeno had once said came back to him. “You lied!” He exclaimed, pointing a finger at Zeno.

“Huh?” This drew everyone’s attention to him.

“You said that you’ve never had sex. But there’s no way the two of you have never consummated!” Jaeha accused.

“Zeno didn’t lie; we don’t have sex.”

“Then what are you doing!?” Jaeha growled.

“Making love.” The couple chorused, making Jaeha deflate.

The exchange left everyone in some state of laughter and amusement, from a suppressed smile (Shin-ah), up to full on laughter (Hak).

Jaeha pouted. “That’s an official’s dodge, using exact words like that.” He grumbled.

“It worked!” Yun reminded him.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, but where did you get your new scarf, Kaya?” Yona asked. “You always wore the white one until recently.”

Fingering her scarf, Kaya said, “Zeno gave it to me.” She couldn’t stop the faint blush and smile that rose up.

“Wait, how’s that work?” Kija asked, confused.

“When Zeno touches one of them, he’s actually shifting into their plane of existence. Since he doesn’t end up naked when that happens, he figured that meant he could bring things with him, and leave them behind. So during our free time at the market fair, Zeno saw the scarf and couldn’t help himself, since he had enough.” Zeno explained.

“I thought I had seen you near that particular vendor, but when you didn’t have anything with you when we met up at the close of the market fair, I thought you had just spent your share on food.” Yun remembered. “I remembered the vendor because I’d never seen one that only seemed to sell scarves and sashes.”
“Why get food when Zeno had a chance to spoil his wife?” He asked rhetorically, setting down his dish and snuggling up with Kaya.

“You spoil me enough without buying me things I don’t technically need.” Kaya countered lightly, with little heat to her protest.

“You never needed the flowers, but you still liked them.”

“But that didn’t involve money…” The couple seemed to forget about the rest of the group, as they rose and set off away from camp.

 “…it’s a good thing Yona-chan and Hak aren’t overly romantic like that; I might have to stage a revolt otherwise.” Jaeha complained, glancing in the direction the couple left in.

“Zeno couldn’t see her, or the others, until he started visiting me as a baby. So for all that time, to him, she was gone somewhere he could never go.” Yona began to explain. “She would enter his dreams, but since he didn’t realize she was still with him…”

“Zeno mentioned once that once he could really see her, and us, again, the dreams she entered felt more real, and he could remember them easier.” Guen noted.

“Yellow Brother was finally able to make contact with Zeno after my fire fully lit and I firmly established myself in relation to dragon-me and him-me. Once that happened, he became able to touch her, and became able to shift into the ghost plane.” Yona continued.

“Does that mean that all those times I couldn’t find him, he had shifted?” Yun asked.

Yona and her spirits shrugged. “Sometimes maybe. But not all the time.” Abi proposed.

“I wanted to ask Zeno why the hand he punched out the rock with looked like mine, but somehow I doubt they’ll be back before morning.” Kija said with a slight pout, looking in the direction the couple had gone in. “It didn’t look like that in Kai.”

Guen and the other two spirits just shrugged, not knowing either. “Are you coming with us in the morning Abi? Into the tunnels?” Yona asked.

“Perhaps.” Abi declined to commit himself then and there.

A noise from his sleeping mate riveted his attention to her. She was almost completely solid, and as he watched, she solidified that last, tiny degree, and opened her eyes.

The feeling that swept through him, as he finally greeted his mate properly, went beyond joy, beyond any language used to describe emotions. He had always thought those newly mated acted strangely, but now he could understand where their behavior came from, if they felt even a fraction of what he was feeling now.

She bumped muzzles with him, drawing him out of his thoughts. Human might place the look in her eyes as teary-eyed happiness, as she nuzzled his head by his ear, to tell him her Name.

Kouryuu.

The name suited her, with how her scales shimmered every color of the rainbow, highlighting their iridescent nature.

With what humans would call a wicked grin, she took off into the sky, a bit stiff and unsteady, daring
him to chase her, and it wasn’t long before they twined around each other in the sky.

He was happy for more than just the awakening of his mate.

With his mate at his side, he could rejoin his brothers and their warriors, when their youngest brother and her mate ended their mortal time on Earth.

“Zeno, make the thumping stop.”

A heavy sigh. “Kaya, there is no thumping.”

Kaya sat up. “Yes there is! I can practically feel it, in my ears…” She trailed off as she covered her ears. “Zeno, my heart’s beating.”

Zeno shot up at that. “WHAT?!"

She pressed a hand to her chest, over her heart. “I’m sure—feel.” Grabbing his hand, she placed it over her heart.

Zeno stared, open-mouthed.

Her heart was beating. But also…

“…you’re warm, too.” He said, dazed.

It wasn’t just the warmth and the heartbeat he noticed. As much as he ignored it, there was always just something a little off about ghosts. If you paid attention and thought about, you realized that they didn’t breathe. Sure, they took breaths when they spoke, but ghosts, especially ancient ones, didn’t breathe outside of that.

But Kaya was.

She was warm and breathing and solid beneath his hand. “…the miss was right…”

“Did you have that dream? Of the pair of dragons? Ouryuu-kami and another one?” She asked.

“Where the other one woke up?” He asked. “And they flew a mating flight?”

“…the other dragon IS my dragon self. Kouryuu.” As she said the second dragon’s name out loud, there was something that seemed to shift, inside, and she knew she was absolutely right.

Cupping Zeno’s face in her hands, she kissed him, and she realized that was different now too. The only way she could describe it was that the sensations felt more real, then they had before.

He was kissing her back, hard, devouring her mouth as their hands sought bare skin. They had scarcely undressed the night before, but now there was the urge to every bit of skin as possible touching.

She wrapped her legs around his waist as he slid in. She was crying a little, between the increased sensations and just the fact that impossible hope had been realized. As he thrusted, kissing her deeply, she rediscovered all the little things she had forgotten, like sweating and increased heart rate and shallower breathing, and all she could do was cling to him.

They came at almost the same time, with him fingering her nub in the right way shortly before he peaked. But as that fierce hotness filled her, she found herself wondering if she could have peaked,
just from feeling that alone.

The best thing about being roughly the same size was that he didn’t have to worry about squishing her beneath him, as he laid on top of her. “I love you Kaya.” He said. “I know I don’t say it as often as I should…”

She shook her head, wiping away his own tears, which had gone unnoticed by both of them until that moment. “It doesn’t matter how often you say; it matters how often you express it. I love you too, Zeno.”

“Raise your hand if you had a dream about a pair of dragons flying last night.” Yun said over breakfast.

A little baffled, everyone raised their hand, Yun included. “So it wasn’t just my head being weird.”

“It was like the dream Hak and I had, that night in Awa, but the dragons were different.” Yona noted.

“One dragon was yellow, and the other was…a rainbow?” Kija recalled, his brow furrowing at the end. “Do you think it was about Zeno and Kaya?”

Giggling disrupted the debate as the couple in question reappeared, nearly falling over themselves as they insisted on walking while holding onto each other. Coming up behind Yona, they pushed Hak out of the way as they hugged her from either side. “?”

“You were right Miss!” Zeno exclaimed, kissing her cheek. “Domo arigatou gozaimashita.”

“Dou itashimashite—wait, Kaya, you’re solid?!” Yona exclaimed, as she touched Kaya’s sleeve and realized her hand didn’t go through it, unlike all those times before.

“?!?!” Everyone made various noises of shock as they huddled around the trio, Kaya also kissing Yona’s cheek. “You were right, when you said I might live again!!!” Kaya explained.

Explained to Yona, anyway. Everyone else was still confused. “Wait, are you saying Zeno basically fucked you back to life?!?” Shuten yelled, Jaeha a touch put out that Shuten had asked the same question as him, if more crudely.

Abi and Shin-ah stared at Kaya, looking deep. “…you ARE alive.” Abi declared, stunned as Yun grabbed her arm and felt for a pulse.

“…there’s a light, inside you, like Zeno, only it’s all different colors, like a rainbow…” Shin-ah revealed as Guen, Hak, and Kija each had to touch Kaya for themselves.

“That fits, since my dragon self is named Kouryuu.” Kaya commented. “When Zeno and I had seen Ouryuu-kami in Fire, he had been curled up with a sleeping dragon that we figured was my dragon self. I hadn’t had to concentrate as much to interact with the living world, and when I mentioned that to Yona…”

“Yellow Brother is the First Dragon and the Dragon of Life. It was nearly impossible to imagine…at minimum, I thought she could join Zeno in the living world.” Yona continued. “I scarcely dared to hope for this outcome.”

“So we have another mouth to feed.” Yun noted, forever practical as he started calculating how much extra food and supplies he’d need.
“YUN/LAD!” Yona and Zeno exclaimed, while the mention of eating made Kaya’s stomach growl loudly.

She turned bright red. “…breakfast?” She asked, sheepishly.

There was some boar’s meat left over, along with a couple apples and two onigiri. “Well, Shin-ah, Kija, Hak, and I are going back into the tunnels to lay the bones to rest properly and find the clan documents Shin-ah remembered from Soren, if they’ve survived.” Yona told Zeno and Kaya as she and the other three left, trailed by Abi.

The couple didn’t notice them leaving. Kaya was too busy savoring her first meal of her new life, and Zeno was too distracted by the noises Kaya was making as she savored. “As much as I as want to taste food again, I don’t want you to fuck me back to life.” Shuten told Zeno, utterly serious.

“Zeno wouldn’t want to fuck you regardless.” Yun and Jaeha visibly choked at hearing the curse word leave Zeno’s lips so casually.

“Anyway,” Yun started as he began his tent repair effort. “Depending on if they find anything, we’ll set out for Hakuryuu Village in the morning.”

“COULD paper have survived hundreds of years underground?” Jaeha asked, pulling out his new book, having borrowed it out of Captain Gi-Gan’s collection after returning his old one.

“Maybe. As long as it stayed dry, and bugs didn’t get to it…” Yun finally just shrugged. “How many bones were down there?”

“I really wasn’t paying much attention. Some of Soren’s bones for sure, since Kija and I found a mask similar to Shin-ah’s near them. I kind of envy Kija; he wasn’t affected at all by those shadow figures.”

“Neither was the Miss.” Zeno reminded him.

“Yona-chan could still see them. Kija couldn’t even feel them.” Jaeha countered. “I really hope we don’t stumble into the ruins of a Ryokuryuu Village. Or across the current one.”

“Where IS your village anyway?” Yun asked, curious.

Snapping his book shut, Jaeha furrowed his brow. “…maybe on the border of Earth and Water? Or in Sky; I knew where the capital was, but that might have been because of Hiryuu Castle. When I ran, I went in the opposite direction from where I felt the others. Awa was where I ran out of land.”

“Shuten? Do you know where it is?” Yun wasn’t quite willing to let the subject drop. Kija’s village honored the dragons; Shin-ah’s forgot their heritage and came to fear it; Zeno doesn’t have a village at all; I can’t help wondering what Jaeha’s village was like, for him to be as focused on freedom as he is.

“Between Earth and Water, near the border of Sky. But there’s no reason to go there, period. If this generation has successors, they probably won’t be born until after Yona’s death, and they’ll probably be this gang’s grandsons or great-grandsons. Guen was the only one of us who sired his successor; for Abi and I, our successors were our grandsons. Then again, it’s not like Guen ever had a serious relationship until after Hiryuu-sama died.” Shuten replied.

“I never met the right woman, and unlike you, casual didn’t do it for me.” Guen pointed out.

“More like you met the right trio of woman.” Shuten snorted.
Standing, Jaeha wandered away from camp. Talking about his village beyond a casual mention always left him in a mood. *I can’t really blame Yun for being curious; that’s the way he is. But I never want to go back, and I especially never want to go back with everyone in tow.*

Chapter End Notes

'Kouryuu' is written with the kanji for 'rainbow' and 'dragon'. Wanted to keep to the naming 'theme' of the others.
Notice

For cosmetic reasons, and to avoid scaring off new readers with a triple digit chapter (MAngel we're all looking at you here), I've divided this into two. Part 2 can be found here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/17357195/chapters/40840577

So everyone who's been dying to leave repeat kudos have a chance to!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!